

PLANTATION INDIAN WOMEN:
A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF INDIAN WOMEN
IN LADANG CHA'AH, JOHORE

By

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SYNOPSIS

This study examines the socio-economic status of Indian women in the plantation. Utilizing a sociological approach, the research was conducted among 45 Indian women respondents in Ladang Cha'ah, an oil palm plantation in the state of Johore in Peninsular Malaysia. The thesis is presented in five chapters.

The first chapter is an introductory chapter which explains the objective of the research and the sociological methods used to obtain data on the subject of study. It also discusses the theoretical framework of the research and the traditional image of women in the Indian culture. The second chapter gives a brief historical perspective of the plantation community but mainly focuses on the place of research with a general description of the setting. It also discusses the occupational structure, income and expenditure patterns within the estate. The main part of chapter three is a discussion on the position of women in relation to work. This is divided into estate work and domestic work where the status of women is examined with regards to her economic and social functions within and outside the home. Attention is also paid to leisure activities among these plantation workers.

Chapter four begins with an introduction to the importance of education with regards to social status and continues with an analysis of the educational attainment among the women respondents. It further explains the factors affecting educational achievements among these plantation women. Finally, chapter five gives a general analysis of the status of Indian women in the plantation in line with the theoretical perspective and concludes with a few suggestions on how to improve the socio-economic status of these women in the plantations.

SINOPSIS

Kajian ini adalah satu percubaan untuk mengutarakan kedudukan sosio-ekonomi wanita India di sektor perladangan. Dengan menggunakan satu pendekatan sosiologikal, kajian ini dijalankan di kalangan 45 orang wanita India di Ladang Cha'ah, iaitu sebuah ladang kelapa sawit di negeri Johor di Semenanjung Malaysia. Tesis ini disampaikan dalam 5 bab.

Bab pertama merupakan satu bab pengenalan di mana objektif kajian ini diterangkan. Ia juga memberi keterangan mengenai metod-metod sosiologikal yang digunakan untuk memperolehi data mengenai subjek kajian. Bab ini juga membincangkan rangka teori yang digunakan serta imej wanita tradisional dalam budaya India. Bab kedua memberi satu penerangan ringkas mengenai perspektif sejarah masyarakat ladang dan seterusnya menumpukan perhatian kepada tempat kajian dengan memberi satu diskripsi am mengenainya. Bab ini juga membincangkan struktur pekerjaan serta pola pendapatan dan perbelanjaan di estet tersebut. Bahagian utama bab ketiga adalah satu perbincangan mengenai kedudukan wanita India dan struktur pekerjaan. Ini dibahagikan kepada pekerjaan di estet dan kerja-kerja rumahtangga di mana status wanita itu dikaji melalui fungsi-fungsi sosial dan ekonominya di dalam dan di luar rumahtangga.

Perhatian juga diberi kepada bentuk aktiviti masa lapang di kalangan wanita India di sektor perladangan.

Bab keempat bermula dengan satu pengenalan kepada kepentingan pendidikan dan kaitannya dengan status sosial seseorang. Seterusnya ia memberi satu analisa mengenai taraf pencapaian pendidikan di kalangan responden dan faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi kadar pencapaian pelajaran di kalangan mereka. Akhir sekali bab kelima memberi satu analisa mengenai taraf kedudukan status wanita India dalam rangka teori yang telah dibincangkan. Bab ini diakhiri dengan beberapa cadangan untuk membantu meningkatkan taraf sosio-ekonomi wanita di sektor perladangan ini.

CHAPTER 1

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

There has been little attention paid to the study of Malaysian Indian women. Although most studies on the Malaysian Indians have described the status and role of women, few have carried out careful and thorough analysis on this subject. This case study is an attempt to fill this gap. It examines the status and role of Indian women in light of some radical theoretical approaches in sociology. More specifically it will draw from recent Neo-Marxist and Weberian literature relating to the status of women.

Most studies on Malaysian Indians were done on estate workers. However, there are few sociological studies pertaining to Indian estate women. Ampalavanar R.(1969), Apputhurai S.D.(1971) and Oorjitham K.S.S.(1983,1984) undertook studies on the Indian women of Malaysia *. These studies all point to the fact that

* Ampalavanar Rajeswary, "Social and Political Development in the Indian Community of Malaya 1920-41". Master's thesis, University of Malaya, 1969.

the Indian women in the estate is subjugated by the men and the estate, which is predominantly male bias.

In this study, I will discuss among others the role of the historical circumstances, socio-cultural factors and contemporary economic status in the subordination and subjugation of Indian women, drawing from the theoretical framework developed by Marx, Engels and Weber. Social factors and circumstances such as exploitation, division of labour, gender differentiation, labour relations, role stratification and class consciousness will be given special emphasis. Attention will also be given to aspects such as attitudes, views and goals which influence the present position and social status of the Indian women in the plantation. The research was conducted in Ladang Cha'ah, an oil palm plantation in the district of Segamat in Johore.

Ladang Tengah". B.A. academic exercise, University of Malaya, 1971.

K.S. Susan Oorjitham, "Indian Women In the Plantation Sector in West Malaysia", in Nusantara, Bil, 1983.

K.S. Susan Oorjitham, "Indian Women Workers in Malaysia" in UWA/APDC Seminar on "Women and Employment" April 16-17, 1984.

1.2 Research Methodology

In line with the objective of this study, only Indians were researched even though the population of Ladang Cha'ah is multi-ethnic. Though the Indians are a minority in Malaysia, it is a well-known fact that they constitute the major ethnic group in most of the rubber and oil palm plantations in Malaysia. Ladang Cha'ah is testimonial to this fact with Indians forming half of its population. This estate was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, I knew the estate well as I had made frequent trips to it before. Secondly, having my immediate family living there for the past ten years made things easier for me. For one thing it meant cutting down on the cost of research by a considerable amount. Furthermore, my family members proved to be an important source of information for my study as well as helping me to gain rapport. They and a number of friends in the estate were very co-operative and willing in rendering their help and services throughout the duration of my research. More often than not I was treated like one of them and not as an outsider who is usually viewed with suspicion by the estate people.

A total of 45 women with ages 17 and above were interviewed. They had been divided into three categories :

- i) 15 working women of the labour-group.

ii) 15 non-working women of the labour-group.

iii) 15 non-working women of the staff-group.

The purpose for this categorization was to analyse the social stratification and the differences in sex-roles between the three categories of women in the estate. My discussion will therefore be based on my observation as well as on interviews conducted among these three categories of respondents. However I must state that they are not the only source of research material for this study as I shall explain in the following section.

The respondents for the study were chosen randomly as the size of population was relatively small and differences in sampling probabilities would be negligible. Therefore the sample chosen is representative. The interview schedule was used as a device for gathering data. I also kept a field diary to record systematically daily observations and responses from respondents. A combination of open-ended and close-ended questions were used to obtain information. The open-ended questions were used in aspects requiring more detailed responses and discussion on the part of the respondents especially on such subjective matters as views and aspirations of respondents. I tried my best to avoid formality when I went on my interviews. On most occasions I was accompanied by a member of my family or

a friend whom most of the respondents were familiar with. This I should say did help considerably as respondents seemed less tense and were more relaxed when speaking to me. This way I was not looked upon as a stranger or official doing a survey on them, instead I was treated more like a visitor to their homes and given cordial attention.

I went on my interview rounds between 6.30 pm to 9.30 pm when most of the respondents were through with their daily chores and were relaxing after a hard-day's work. I usually made friendly conversation first before starting on the interview schedules. I also took every opportunity to observe the homes of the respondents, their mannerism and general attitude of themselves and their families. On the whole, I had good response from my respondents. However there were a few who displayed a certain degree of fear and hostility. Most of the interviews with respondents were conducted in Tamil. For the purpose of verification and also to examine the validity of information gathered, cross-checks and double-checks were done whenever it was possible to compare answers with information gathered from other means or sources.

Apart from the interview schedule method it should be noted that the participant observational

method was also used as my own mother was chosen to be one of my respondents. Thus my stay with my family enabled me to do an in-depth study and make field-notes that recorded salient features of the behaviour of my respondent. This observational method also proved to be a very flexible technique that allowed me to concentrate on any interesting variable that proved to be important.

I encountered only a few problems in carrying out this research. Generally most of the subjects of study were responsive. However there were a few respondents who initially were rather sceptical when approached. Nevertheless, there was not a single respondent who completely refrained from answering my questions. A few thought of me as a management spy and saw me as a threat to their occupational positions. This was because being a rather small and closed community news travels fast among the people and it so happened that news got around that I had been to see the General Manager before starting on my research work. They were not aware that the purpose of my meeting the General Manager was to obtain permission to do the research in the estate. An explanation as to my actual purpose of study did help reduce the suspicion.

One frequent problem faced was finding the right time to carry out the interviews. This problem was

especially so among the working women with very young children. These respondents heavily laden with the household chores after a hard day's work in the plantation as well as having to care for their young ones did find it very inconvenient to answer questions amid a wailing baby or cooking dinner on the stove simultaneously. Another problem observed was shyness in most respondents. Certain respondents were just too shy of me and they either gave 'yes' and 'no' answers or smiled shyly or just avoided answering certain questions. A few always sought the assistance of their husbands or children to answer questions for them. Related to this problem is embarrassment in answering sensitive questions such as "Do you practice family planning?" or "Does your husband consume liquor/alcohol?". Many gave denials to the latter when cross-checks proved otherwise. It is interesting to note that on one occasion I was faced with a rather embarrassing situation when a drunk relative kept interrupting me from conducting an interview with one respondent. However the respondent herself was very helpful in encouraging me to ignore the problem-maker and to continue without paying any heed to him. On the whole the research was conducted quite smoothly.

1.3 Theoretical Perspectives

The subordinate position of women is rooted in multiple causes reinforced by many different institutions and practices. The status of women vary significantly with the mode of production, the level of technology and the ideational superstructure of a particular society. As will be demonstrated, the almost universal allocation of child-bearing and domestic labour to women on the basis of their biological propensity to bearing children is a major contributing factor to their relative powerlessness in most societies. Differentiation however leads to stratification of power, authority and prestige because some tasks typically give greater access to the valued resources of society than others. The allocation to women of childminding and domestic labour gives men an advantage over women. Women are burdened with small children and domestic routine, whilst men are relatively free to participate in the wider society.

A fundamental principle of Neo-Marxist models hold that who plays the principal role in production must in time come to control it. Control of production leads to political, economic and ideational control of the society or group (Marx and Engels, 1970). Male domination of production activities in most societies means

within a Marxian framework that most societies will be dominated by men. Marx and Engels developed a theory wherein the status of women in society was ultimately related to property relations (Marx,1970; Marx and Engels,1970). The male advantage gained through control of production allowed them to institutionalize monogamous marriage supported by patriarchal ideology which stated that men were the "rightful" heads of families and women were subordinate to them (Engels,1972). Patriarchal ideology decrees that a woman's "place" is at home. If forced to work outside the home, the subordinate position of women in class societies allows for their economic exploitation as workers. Men and women as workers are oppressed in class society but men as husbands in patriarchal societies contribute to the oppression of women in general and their wives in particular (Marx,1967).

Women who participate in productive activities have economic independence but no political power and prestige. Within a Marxist framework, the subordinate position of women would be ascribed to the effects of class society and private ownership of the means of production. In class society men's participation in productive activities is generally greater than that of women's. This means that just as the bourgeoisie gain

control of the proletariat because they own and control the means of production, so men as a gender group as owners and controllers of the means of production, control women. In some instances women play the major role in production but men control the product of their labour; men wield formal social power and men are accorded the most social prestige. This inconsistency is due to the counter-balancing effect of patriarchal ideology in class society which ranks men as being of greater value than women, irrespective of production activities undertaken by women.

In all societies the biological differences between men and women are given social meaning and translated into social action. On the basis of culture related interpretations of their mental, physical and emotional qualities and capabilities, men and women are assigned gender appropriate social roles. The "masculine" and "feminine" roles assigned to men and women as gender groups are normative and behavioural and in addition they are legitimated by reference to ideologies which may explain the allocation of roles in terms of biology, theology, tradition, economics or functional necessity (Mead, 1928).

Sexual division of labour which is characteristic of all societies produces a system of gender-

role stratification wherein men are generally assigned the positions of prestige and power, whilst women are generally excluded from them (Murdock 1967). Men typically occupy those status positions which give them greater socio-economic and political rewards. Under the capitalist mode of production, the worth of the labourer is evaluated in terms of the economic return awarded for his or her labour, although the worker is only paid for necessary labour time and not labour that goes into the production of surplus. The wage therefore does not reflect the true value of labour (Marx, 1967).

Under capitalism domestic labour is accorded neither state nor private recognition or reward. "Housework" is not included in labour force statistics. The contribution domestic labour makes to the production of labour power is not calculated in the reckoning of economists and those who perform the unrecognised and unrewarded domestic labour receive neither pay, power or prestige. In capitalistic society as in all other societies, women have the prime responsibility for childminding and domestic labour, thus it is women who feel the effects of domestic labour being apart from productive activities. The majority of women who worked as wives and mothers have traditionally been assigned the tasks of housework and childminding, thus when they

work outside the home it is generally women who must bear the burden of two roles. Despite the reality of a high proportion of women, married, single, widowed or divorced - participating in the paid labour force, contributing to the economic well-being of their families or bearing prime responsibility for them, patriarchal ideology persists. The attitude that a man is the "head of households" still holds sway in certain classes and in certain communities and this ideology is reinforced by multiple structural arrangements. The high degree of gender role differentiation which is a characteristic of peasant social systems is generally thought to enhance the status of women, for where there is rigidity in the sexual division of labour, male and female labour is obligatory. This potential enhancement of status usually occurs in economic terms only and does not necessarily interlink with high social prestige or political power. As "head of households" men ultimately own and control the labour of all members of their families. The allocation of childminding and domestic labour to women allows men to monopolize the formal positions of power in the public and private domains, thus limiting women to the private domain which does not generate power, merely influence (O'Brien, 1979 : 49). Subsequent generations would be socialized in terms of the same gender-appro-

appropriate norms, beliefs and values concerning gender roles and the system would be perpetuated (Weber, 1964).

In the Hindu culture, the purpose of life is determined by the four goals of life: dharma, artha, kama and moksha. Dharma is the duty or moral obligation of an individual, which is determined by his or her caste and position in society. Artha is the pursuit of wealth and material success, kama is the pursuit of pleasure and sensual gratification, and moksha is the ultimate goal of liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

According to the Hindu belief, a woman's primary duty is to serve her husband and to bear children. This is known as the 'four pillars of a woman's life'.

The role of the woman is determined by her caste and position in society. In the Hindu culture, a woman is expected to be obedient to her husband and to manage the household. She is also expected to bear children and to care for them. The Hindu culture is a patriarchal society, where men are the head of the household and women are expected to follow their lead. The Hindu culture is also a caste-based society, where social status is determined by birth. A woman's caste and position in society determine her role and responsibilities.

"In this world, a woman must be subject to her husband, as the earth is subject to the sky, the water to the earth, and the fire to the water. A woman must never be independent." (Hindu proverb)

She must especially to her husband and to her children. The Hindu culture is a patriarchal society, where men are the head of the household and women are expected to follow their lead. The Hindu culture is also a caste-based society, where social status is determined by birth. A woman's caste and position in society determine her role and responsibilities. The Hindu culture is a conservative society, where change is slow and traditional values are highly valued. The Hindu culture is also a religious society, where religion plays a central role in daily life. The Hindu culture is a diverse society, with many different beliefs and practices. The Hindu culture is a rich and complex society, with a long and storied history.

1.4 The "Ideal Indian Woman"

Indian women are strongly bound by religion, culture and tradition. In the Brahmanical Law, the purpose of life of the woman is determined only by the most important worldly and religious goal of the Aryan Hindu.

"Woman is created only to enable man to continue his species through sons and Gods."

(Mies 1979 : 27)

The role of the woman is determined wholly by this goal which is the most important of all the patriarchal Aryan Hindu. She is viewed as the medium for the production of sons. As a daughter she is considered above all a misfortune for the mother especially if she has not fulfilled the only purpose of her life, to be the mother of sons. As a wife a woman was never to be independent and without male control in her life. The Manu Code states,

"In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in her youth to her husband, when her lord is dead, to her sons. A woman must never be independent."

(Mies 1979 : 28)

She owed especially to her husband absolute obedience and is not permitted to do anything without his consent. Manu emphasises repeatedly that women are not created to be independent and must therefore always be watched, protected and controlled by a man. The dependence of the wife on the husband was primarily of an economic nature, but extended also to all other activities of women; she

also has no independence in religious matters. It is therefore the highest duty of every man even of a lowly born to carefully watch and protect his woman. But the duty of the wife is to worship her "master" as her first God; for only thus she can hope to make spiritual gains. Her prayers, fasts, ascetic exercises and pilgrimages are all for the salvation of the husband. She must always try to please him and serve him. Above all she should in no way give even the impression of violating marital fidelity, neither during the lifetime of the husband, nor after his death.

These legal norms found in the Brahmanical law-books and above all the Code of Manu strengthens the sosio-cultural determinants of female roles. Although these legal norms have undergone great changes in the course of time, particularly in the last hundred years; the social ideal of womanhood in the present day society cannot be understood without a knowledge of these norms (Mies, 1979 : 36).

The concept of work or duties of women began to be restricted to the household and areas related to it. The joint family system was propagated with strong patriarchal overtones. Women were married at or before puberty and this deprived them of many other opportunities like education. Lack of education, active involvement in other sectors like the economy and low

exposure further stunted the intellectual development of the Indian women. They became dependent on man, not only for economic support and physical protection but also for mental guidance. The restriction of women's work to household and childcare further isolated women from the economy thereby placing the rights to property and ownership, in the hands of men. As a result the status of men grew together with their culture, active participation in all sectors of society and their rights to property ownership. This even resulted in the supreme dominance of men in the household. A woman had to be subservient and submissive to her husband. Within such a patriarchal environment, her work was clearly demarcated and confined increasingly to housekeeping and childcare. This relationship of women to 'work' continued right up till the time of British occupation in India and persists in a modified form, even in contemporary society (Oorjitham, 1984 : 10).

Then began the pattern of immigration and with this the traditional position of the Indian women has undergone certain changes as they were thrown into a totally new social setting. Certain adaptations had to be made but many obvious factors prevailing among the present day Indian women in the estates in West Malaysia are in fact historically and culturally determined.

Therefore the socio-economic and cultural positions of Indian women can only be understood with an analysis of the traditional position of women in the Indian society.

Henceforth, my analysis of the women of Ladang Cha'ah will be presented in the context of the theoretical framework already specified and also bearing in mind these historical and traditional factors which by and large still remains a major influence among the contemporary Indian community in general and more specifically among the Indian women in plantations in the country.

CHAPTER 2

2. THE SETTING

2.1 Historical Background of the Plantation Community

A historical background is imperative in order to comprehend the complexities of the plantation environment and the relative position of the estate Indian women. Erich Fromm in his theory stressed,

"..... that an understanding of the dynamic nature of individuals and groups must take into account their particular social, economic and historical circumstances."

(Fromm, 1956 : 82)

The present Indian community found in the estates and plantation sectors in West Malaysia are in fact descendants of the Indian immigrants who arrived in this country during the colonial period. The mass Indian migration that occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century till the first half of the twentieth century had left a permanent Indian ethnicity in the multi-racial population of Malaysia. What began as British economic expansion and gathering of cheap labour from Southern India to work primarily in the various plantations in Malaya left behind a significant impact on the population structure. The number of Indians in Malaya from a total of 268,269 in 1911 spiralled to 470,180 ten years later (Sandhu, 1969 : 81). Though at the earlier

stage of migration, the proportion of female immigrants were scarce compared to the males, however during the late 1920's various measures were undertaken to ensure a balanced flow of male and female Indians into Malaya. The government authorities in the Malay States reduced the assessments paid on women workers in connection with the Indian Immigration Fund and increased the commission of Kanganys* for female workers and married men accompanied by their families. The authorities in India stipulated that there should at least be one female emigrant for every 1.5 males assisted to emigrate as labourers (Sandhu 1969 : 97-98). Even then women made up only 25 to 45 per cent of the total Indian labour force in the Malay States and of these more than 80 per cent were in the agricultural sector (Sandhu, 1969 : 245).

The present labourers in the estates mainly comprise of the second, third and fourth generation of the first fore-fathers who arrived in this country. This goes to show that the majority of the Indians did not

* A Kangany is a head in charge of labourers in a certain village. He is usually instructed by the British employers to recruit workers usually from his own village in India. All costs involved in the Kangany system of recruiting labourers is met by the British employers. The Kangany in return is paid a commission for every worker recruited (Daniel : Course Lecture).

venture very far since the colonial times when they were placed as labourers in the estates. For a majority of them the plantation remained as a boundary for the workers' existence. The customs and traditions of the plantation workers who were largely agriculturists from Southern India, continued to be practiced in their new plantation setting. Thus the plantation became an extended village of South India (Jain 1970 : 295).

The point relevant to this written paper is that the plantation society has been functioning as a relatively well-integrated, on-going social system with a sense of identity and continuity. They possess their own distinctive sub-culture which has its own social attributes, particularly in the area of child upbringing, socialization, aspirations and working patterns which seem to have come naturally as the inhabitants of the plantation system were made to adopt the skills, values, beliefs, norms and other necessary requirements for the effective operation of a plantation system (See also Selvaratnam 1978 : 3). Thus there was the process of assimilating and blending into a new social situation, forming a distinct way of everyday life to fit into the industrial sub-system of the plantation community. One can say that a particular plantation is a total society or community by itself. It

is common to hear the plantation community being referred to as the 'estate people' and the women as 'estate women' thus indirectly showing a social distinction of this group among the general society. Here, in Southern Peninsula Malaysia. The Master Plan for Ladang Cha'ah was drawn-up and implemented by Harry O. Williams. Clearing began in January 1974 and the early efforts of clearing and planting developed into what is today a segment of the vast acres of the present site. The estate which was officially opened by the late Sultan of Johore in 1976 is presently owned by Kempalan Guthrie Sdn. Bhd. (Berita Guthrie Oct. 1981 ed.). It covers a total area of 2808 hectares and is reputed to be one of the company's largest land holdings worth millions of dollars. It is divided into three major divisions :-

- i) Romé Division (850 Hectares)
- ii) Simpang Riri Division (860 Hectares)
- iii) Sungai Sayang Division (1098 Hectares)

Ladang Cha'ah is located within the boundaries of the Segamat District. The nearest town is Cha'ah, a small but busy area which is approximately 8 kilometres away. The estate itself is off the main-road. About 3 kilometres of laterite road leads into Ladang Cha'ah. The first sight to capture one's attention is the almost continuous row of oil palm trees on either

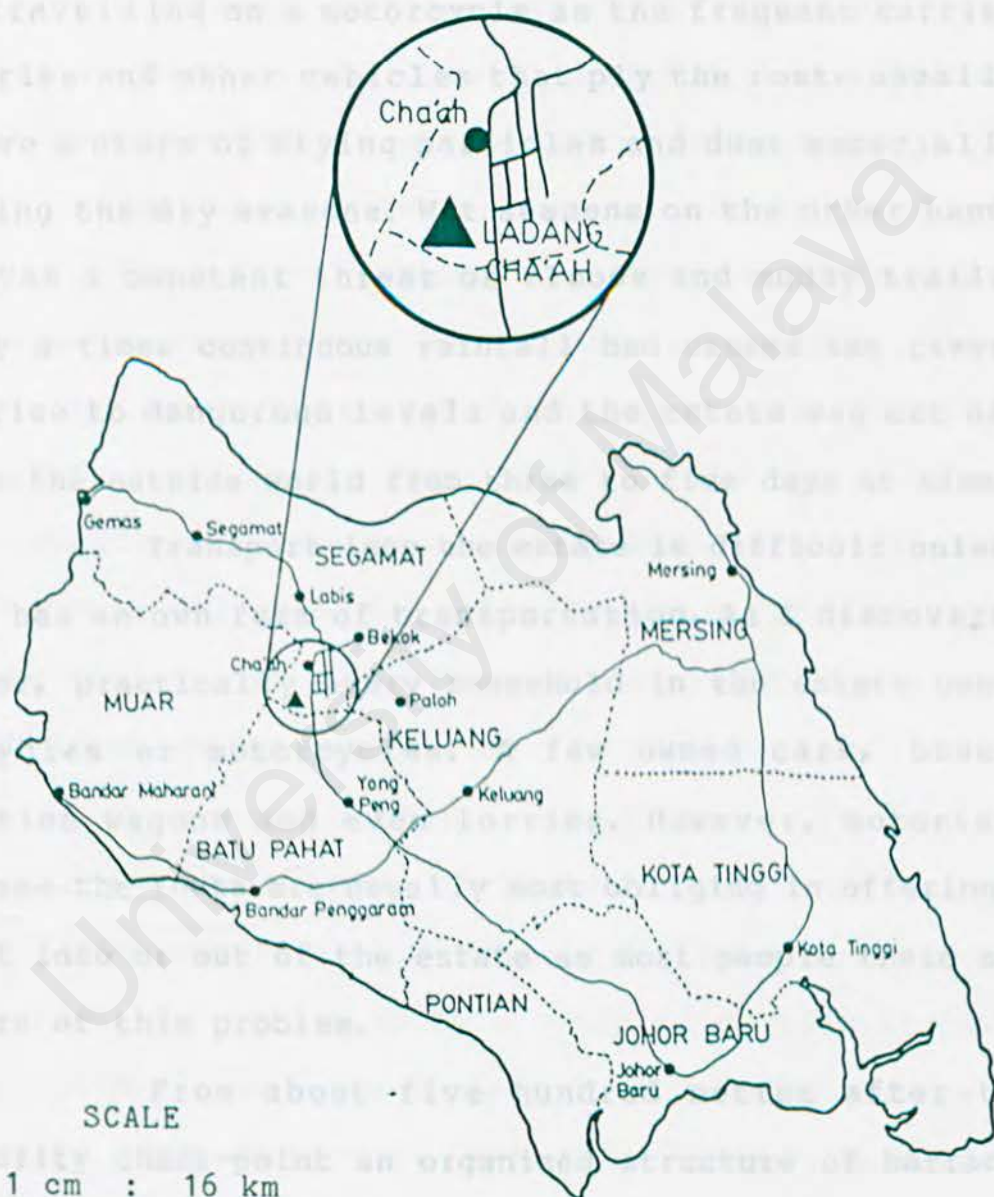
2.2 Location and Physical Features of Ladang Cha'ah

Ladang Cha'ah was opened in 1974 when a European-owned company, Guthrie Ropel, purchased, cleared and planted the land in the state of Johore, in Southern Peninsula Malaysia. The Master Plan for Ladang Cha'ah was drawn-up and implemented by Harry O. Williams. Clearing began in January 1974 and the early efforts of clearing and planting developed into what is today a segment of the vast acres of the present site. The estate which was officially opened by the late Sultan of Johore in 1976 is presently owned by Kumpulan Guthrie Sdn. Bhd. (Berita Guthrie Oct. 1981 ed.). It covers a total area of 2808 hectares and is reputed to be one the company's largest land holdings worth millions of dollars. It is divided into three major divisions :-

- i) Home Division (850 Hectares)
- ii) Simpang Kiri Division (860 Hectares)
- iii) Sungai Sayang Division (1098 Hectares)

Ladang Cha'ah is located within the boundaries of the Segamat District. The nearest town is Cha'ah, a small but busy area which is approximately 8 kilometres away. The estate itself is off the main-road. About 3 kilometres of laterite road leads into Ladang Cha'ah. The first sight to capture one's attention is the almost continuous row of oil palm trees on either

FIGURE 1 : LOCATION OF LADANG CHA'AH



side of the road with their palms covered with red soil due to the flying dust caused by passing vehicles. The ride into the estate can be quite unpleasant especially if travelling on a motorcycle as the frequent carrier lorries and other vehicles that ply the route usually leave a storm of flying particles and dust especially during the dry seasons. Wet seasons on the other hand, leaves a constant threat of floods and muddy trails. Many a times continuous rainfall had caused the rivers to rise to dangerous levels and the estate was cut off from the outside world from three to five days at times.

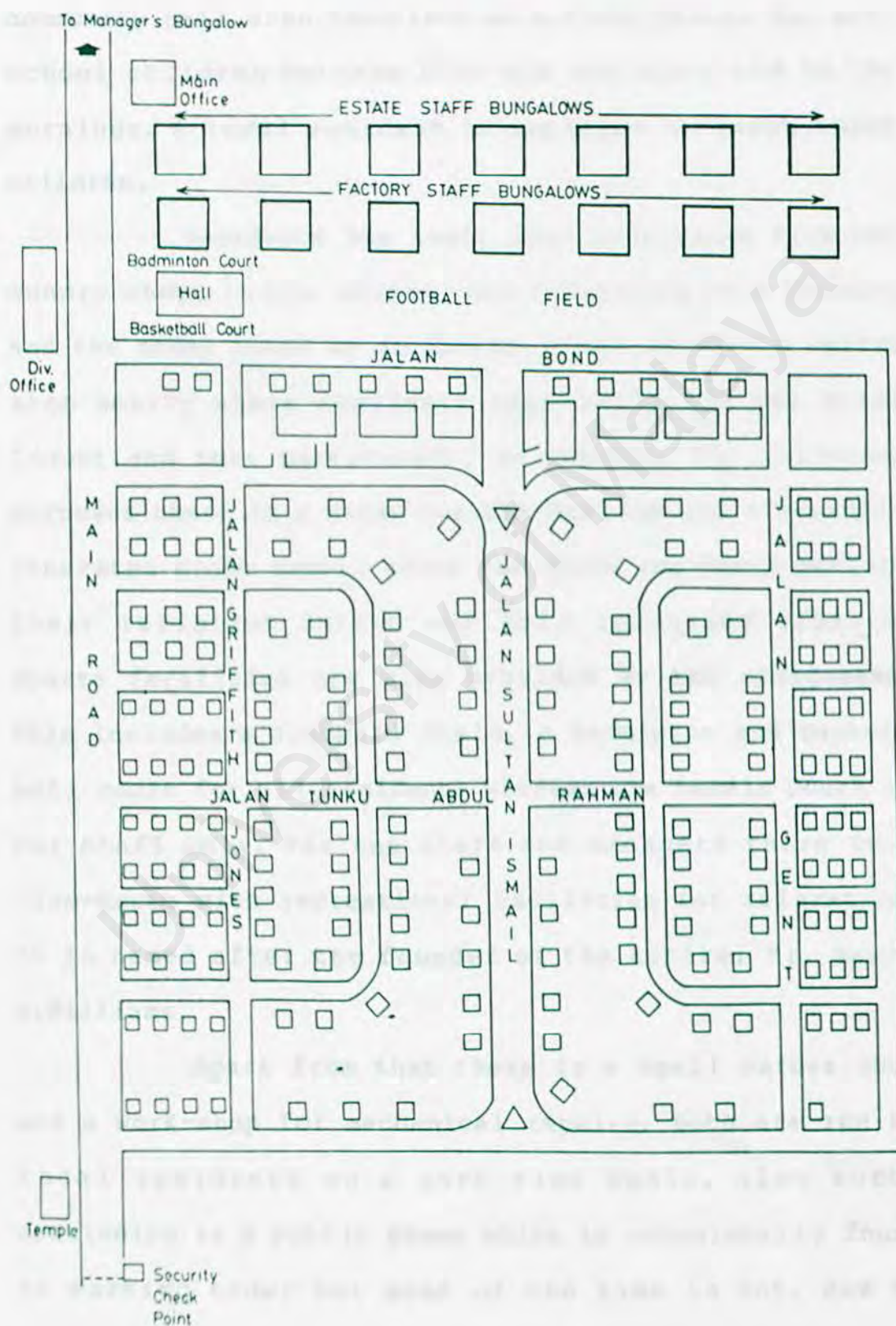
Transport into the estate is difficult unless one has an own form of transportation. As I discovered later, practically every household in the estate owned bicycles or motorcycles. A few owned cars, buses, station wagons and even lorries. However, motorists plying the route are usually most obliging in offering a lift into or out of the estate as most people there are aware of this problem.

From about five hundred metres after the security check-point an organized structure of barrack-like housing will come into view. The term "line-site" is used to describe the housing pattern for labourers. The houses are in semi-detached form and each house has a moderately-sized hall, two rooms, a kitchen, a

bathroom and a toilet. Residents pay for the electricity supply but receive free water supply. The surroundings are also clean and well maintained with proper sanitary and sewage systems. On the whole the living conditions of the workers in the estate is quite good with all basic amenities being provided by the management.

Among other features to be seen in the estate are as follows :- A small clinic where residents receive treatment for minor ailments or injuries. Major cases are usually referred either to the district hospitals in Segamat or Batu Pahat. In the centre of the settlement area there is a creche where working parents send their children to while they are at work. The estate employs two women to mind the creche. The number of children at the creche vary from time to time. At the time of my research there were nineteen pre-school children and two infants. Educational facilities include subsidized bus-fare for school-children and also a library which was set up by a group of varsity students from the Tamil Language Society of University Malaya on a social work project in 1983. This library is used by students and residents to borrow books, to read newspapers and also to study when home environment is not conducive for studies. There is also a community hall where official functions, meetings, variety shows and

FIGURE 2 : LAND SITE MAP OF LADANG CHA'AH



large social functions such as weddings are held. This community hall also functions as a kindergarten for pre-school children between five and six years old in the mornings. A local resident is employed to teach these children. Residents buy their food provisions from two sundry shops in the estate, one belonging to a Chinese and the other owned by an Indian. There is also a coffee shop nearby where residents especially the men drink liquor and beer particularly on pay-day. For religious purposes there is a Surau for the Muslims and a recently renovated Hindu temple where the Hindu residents perform their religious duties and hold religious affairs. Sports facilities are also provided by the management. This includes a football field, a badminton and basketball court for all residents whereas the tennis court is for staff only. For the staff and managers there is a club-house with recreational facilities for relaxation. It is named after the founder of the estate, Mr. Harry O. Williams.

Apart from that there is a small barber shop and a work-shop for mechanical repairs. Both are run by local residents on a part-time basis. Also worth mentioning is a public phone which is occasionally found in working order but most of the time is not, due to

vandalism. Thus, if the need arises to make an urgent call one has to travel all the way out of the estate to find a public booth along the main road.

In general the above mentioned features provide the estate with a good picture of healthy and comfortable living. It also proves to be well facilitated compared to many other plantations.

TABLE 3 : ETHNIC COMPOSITION OF POPULATION

ETHNIC GROUP	NUMBER	%
MALAY	497	49.5
INDIAN	361	36.4
CHINESE	10	1.0
OTHER	5	0.5
TOTAL	873	100.0

The table shows that like many other estates in Peninsular Malaysia Indians make up the majority of the population in Ladang Che'ah. The population of Ladang Che'ah is also relatively balanced with young and old alike. In general, inter-racial relationship is harmonious except for a few minor incidents of quarrels and misunderstandings. Social interaction between the ethnic groups is normally obvious during festive seasons such as Hari Raya Aidil Fitri, Hari Raya Haji among the

2.3 Demographic Structure

Ladang Cha'ah has a total resident population of 994. As Table 1 shows, 50.4 per cent of the population are Indian while 49.5 per cent are Malay and only 0.1 per cent Chinese.

TABLE 1 : ETHNIC BREAKDOWN OF POPULATION

ETHNIC GROUP	NUMBER	%
MALAYS	492	49.5
INDIANS	501	50.4
CHINESE	1	0.1
OTHERS	0	0.0
TOTAL	994	100.0

The table shows that like many other estates in Peninsula Malaysia Indians make up the majority of the population in Ladang Cha'ah. The population of Ladang Cha'ah is also relatively balanced with young and old alike. In general, inter-racial relationship is harmonious except for a few minor incidents of quarrels and misunderstandings. Social interaction between the ethnic groups is normally obvious during festive seasons such as Hari Raya Aidil Fitri, Hari Raya Haji among the

Malays and Deepavali and Christmas celebrated among the Indians. Other than that, apart from the social interaction that occurs during working hours on matters related to work, there is little social interaction between the ethnic groups, each preferring to gather with their own races after working hours are through. However it must be mentioned that there are a few who seem to enjoy close friendship with those of a different ethnic background. This is especially noticed between Indian and Malay neighbours.

It should be further noted that the Indians as a communal group are also delineated into sub-ethnic groups e.g. Tamils, Telegus, Malayalees, etc. However there is not a distinct sign of sub-ethnic segregation among the labour group as most of them saw themselves as belonging to the same class - that of a low economic status and usually referred to themselves as "koolies" or labourers. However the same cannot be said about the Indians who rank in the higher income group, as there was a definite sign of class consciousness as they viewed themselves as being of the higher economic strata and identified themselves as the "staff and managerial group".

The lingua franca among the ethnic groups was usually colloquial Malay while Tamil was most frequently

used among the Indians. Malayalam, Telugu and Ceylonese were also frequently spoken among the respective sub-ethnic groups. The staff and managers usually spoke English among themselves. However among the labour class it was a problem of poor command and lack of fluency in the language. The school-going children usually prefer to converse in Tamil or Bahasa Malaysia. They often shy away when spoken to in English.

The women of Ladang Cha'ah mostly belong to the second and third generation of Indians in the country who are mostly local born. To a majority of them the plantation environment is where they were born into, where they have lived all their lives and where they will probably remain for the rest of their living years. Among the 45 respondents, 18 were Tamilians, 13 were Telugus, 19 were Malayalees and 5 were Ceylonese. The breakdown and percentage is presented more clearly in the following table.

2.4 TABLE 2 : PERCENTAGE OF LINGUISTIC GROUPS AMONG RESPONDENTS

There are three distinct social classes in Ladang Cha'ah. It is a hierarchical order with the labour class at the bottom, the staff class in the middle and the managers on the top. The managers are provided with better housing, higher incomes and other fringe benefits. There is little social difference between these groups apart from what is related to estate production processes. The discrepancy between the manager's life-styles and hill-top huge bungalows, big cars, provision of air-conditioned

LINGUISTIC GROUPS	NUMBER	%
TAMILIANS	18	40
TELUGUS	13	29
MALAYALEES	9	20
CEYLONESE	5	11
TOTAL	45	100

Among these respondents 89 per cent were Hindus and the remaining eleven per cent were Christians. As for their marital status 30 were married and 15 were single. Other differences among the Indian women are differences in education levels, income levels and type of occupation. These shall be dealt with in detail in chapters 3 and 4.

in the estate's authority structure. This pattern of communal division, class and systemic economic integration is intertwined within a system of social class stratification directly related to the estates' hierarchical structure (See Figure 3).

The head of the estate is the Estate Manager. Incidentally Ladang Cha'ah received a new Estate Manager who moved in only a week before I started on my research work. He has vast knowledge and experience working in at

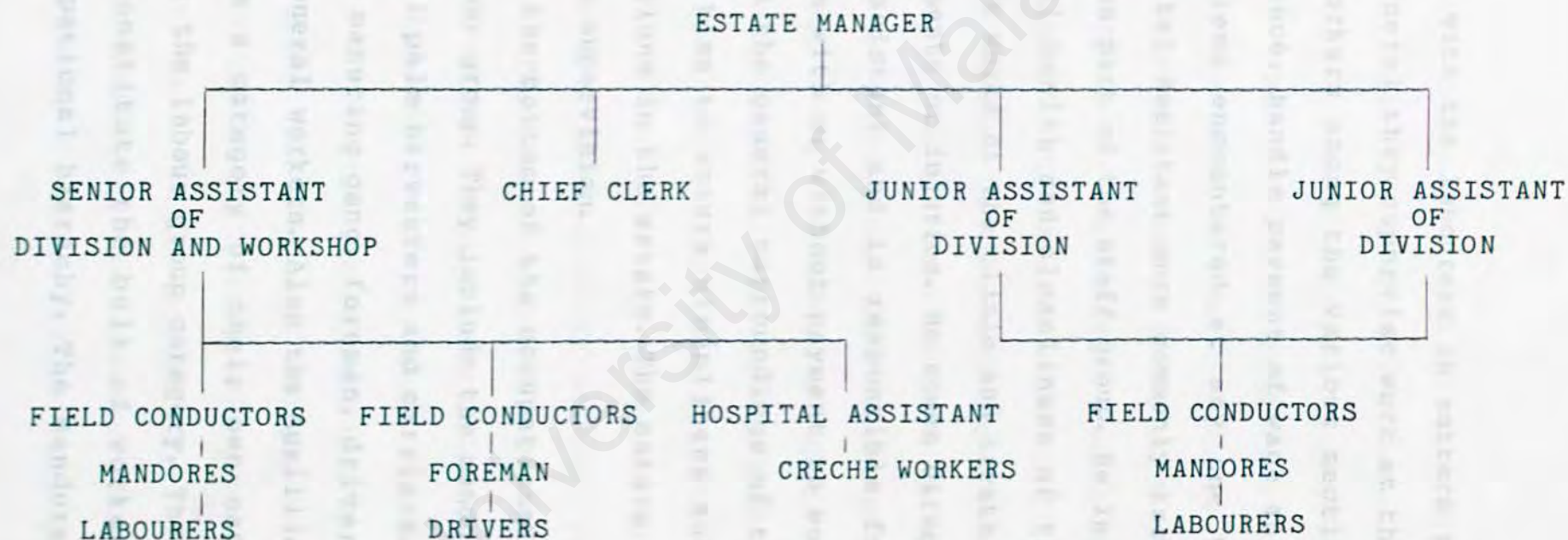
2.4 Occupational Structure

There are three distinct social classes in Ladang Cha'ah. It is a hierachical order with the labour class at the bottom, the staff class in the middle and the estate managers on the top. The managerial class are provided with better housing, higher incomes and other attractive fringe benefits. There is little social interaction between these groups apart from what is related to estate production processes. The discrepancy between the manager's life-styles (e.g. hill-top huge bungalows, big cars, provision of air-conditioned landrovers, etc.), and that of the staff (e.g. single storey bungalows, housing furniture, other fringe benefits, etc.) and the labourers (barrack-like housing, less attractive fringe benefits, etc.) graphically illustrates the socio-economic differentiation and rank in the estate's authority structure. This pattern of communal division, class and systemic economic integration is intertwined within a system of social class stratification directly related to the estates' hierachical structure (See Figure 3).

The head of the estate is the Estate Manager. Incidentally Ladang Cha'ah received a new Estate Manager who moved in only a week before I started on my research work. He has vast knowledge and experience working in at

least ten other estates (Berita Guthrie July, 1980 ed.). Being new to the place he was at that time quite unfamiliar with the surroundings and people of the estate. Directly under him are three Assistants. The Senior Assistant is in charge of one Division and the workshop. The other two are Junior Assistants who are both in charge of one Division each. All of them belong to the Managerial group. The next group are the staff. They include the three office clerks, one a Chief Clerk and the other two were referred to as the Second and Third Clerk respectively. The three clerks work directly under the Estate Manager. The Main Office is where these three clerks work and this is where the Estate Manager's office is located. The three clerks generally deal with all clerical and office duties. Next are the Field Conductors. They come directly under the Senior and Junior Assistants. Basically the duty of the Field Conductors is to supervise the workers in the field seeing to proper and effective work by the labourers. They are often referred to as the 'Keranis'. Apart from supervision in the fields, they also handle certain amount of office work and all nine of them are stationed at the Divisional Office where the offices of the Senior and Junior Assistants are located. Most of the time they are in the fields and it is this group who deal and

FIGURE 3 : THE OCCUPATIONAL STRUCTURE IN LADANG CHA'AH



interact most with the labourers in matters pertaining to work. In general they supervise work at the fields, divide the workers among the various sections, take daily attendance, handle payment of wage and general working problems encountered at any one time. The Estate's Hospital Assistant more commonly known as the Dresser is also part of the staff group. He is in charge of the general health and cleanliness of the estate environment. He works at the clinic and treats residents for minor ailments or injuries. He comes directly under the Senior Assistant and is responsible for giving medical leave with or without payment to workers. He also inspects the general surroundings of the estate from time to time to ensure cleanliness and healthy living conditions in the estate. The estate creche is also under his supervision.

At the bottom of the occupational hierarchy comes the labour group. They include the mandores or the overseers, oil palm harvesters and carriers, weeders, sprayers, the manuring gang, foreman, drivers, creche workers and general workers. Also the Auxilliary Police Force who are a category of their own can also be included under the labour group category. These are the people who constitute the bulk of workers in the estates' occupational hierarchy. The Mandores enjoy a

status slightly above the workers as they receive slightly higher wages than other workers. There are four groups of mandores, each in charge of a certain type of labour. There are the harvesting mandores, the weeding mandores, pest and disease control mandores and the spraying mandores. Their job is to be with the workers throughout their working hours and to ensure that no one is idling on the job and to make sure work is carried out properly according to instructions given and also see to the completion of work on time as scheduled. These mandores fall under the supervision of the Field Conductors. Then comes all the other workers who are supervised by the Mandores. However the harvesters and carriers and even the drivers who drive the carrier lorries, trailers and tractors at times earn two to three times as much as the other workers especially during peak fruiting seasons when the crop is heavy and extra income is earned through heavier crop harvested and overtime done by d the Drivers. The Auxilliary Police Force (A.P.'s) or 'Polis Bantuan' as they are called are a group of their own, who are in charge of the general security in the estate. Oil palm harvesters harvest the oil palm fruits and the carriers usually wives or family members of the harvester work together. The harvester's job is known to be very physically

demanding and as such is only handled by the stronger of the males. The job of the carrier is to collect the harvested fruits on a wheel-barrow and to deposit them at certain spots where it would be collected later by the carrier lorries or trailers. The job of the Weeders is to keep the growth of weeds and undergrowth under control. The sprayers handle the spraying of pesticides or insecticides to control pest and diseases. The manuring gang handle the application of manure and fertilizers to enhance the growth of oil palm. The general workers comprise of sweepers, rubbish collectors, gardeners and helpers.

This occupational structure (See Figure 3) is one that is common in most estate plantations. The position on the ladder of occupational hierarchy directly depicts the social status of the individual in the estate. Therefore, to speak of a person's "class" is to speak of that person's approximately shared location in the economic hierarchy. Hence, with the occupational hierarchy, it is clear that women occupy the lowest rank. It follows from here that the Indian women in Ladang Cha'ah are generally considered as of "lower class".

workers to have less than 24 days of a monthly average of total days worked. Recent dispute between the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW) and the Malayan Agricultural Producers Association (MAPA) failed to reach an agreement when MAPA refused to concede to the Union's demand of a minimum guaranteed monthly wage (New Straits Times, April 19, 1986). Workers of the labour group are paid their wages in two halves. The first half being the 'advance' is paid during the middle of the month and the second half, which is the 'salary' is paid normally in the first week of the month.

In comparison, those in the managerial and staff group receive better income and their salaries are paid monthly. Thus they are not threatened by the risks faced by the plantation industry. They enjoy a relatively higher standard of living with attractive fringe benefits such as better housing, provision of house-hold furniture, free supply of stove and gas, free labour to do gardening and general work among others. Therefore, they most definitely enjoy higher benefits in terms of real income.

In terms of expenditure, members of the labour group spend major portions of their income for their basic necessities. These include daily grocery, sundry goods as well as transport and educational

expenses. Besides this, most households do spend money on some form of entertainment especially in the rental of video tapes, while additional expenditure is incurred by households having smokers, gamblers or alcoholics in the family. In addition, most households do indulge in the purchase of various household items from month to month. This usually includes furniture, television sets, cassette players, sewing machines, refrigerators, video players, kitchen appliances and so on.

More often than not their income is not sufficient to meet all these expenses. Thus various measures are employed to offset this problem. They may vary from buying on credit basis especially for grocery and sundry items or buying on hire purchase basis. Apart from this, a unique system prevalent among these households which also helps to ease their financial burden is the 'kootu system' *. Pawning of gold items is also a frequent measure used to cope in times of financial difficulties.

Despite all these, data still showed that expenditure usually exceeds income though there is no

* The 'kootu system' is a system whereby a group of usually ten people participate by paying anything between \$5 to \$50 or even more on a monthly basis. Each month one member of the group would receive the total sum of the money pooled. This system will rotate until all members have received their due.

direct indication that there is absolute poverty among the labour class in Ladang Cha'ah.

University of Malaya

CHAPTER 3

3.

WOMEN AND WORK

3.1 Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, during the earlier stages of Indian immigration to Malaysia, women constituted only about 20 per cent of the total immigrants. There are several reasons for this. Women in India held a subordinate position in their society. They were thought to be weak and dependent on men for almost everything. Besides, early marriages and the restrictions of the joint family system which existed then, resulted in the scarcity of female labour even in India. As such there was only a small population of Indian women who were available for work in Malaysia. Furthermore, the employers often considered the female labourers as less efficient and productive and more costly to maintain in terms of supervision, accommodation and maternity leave as well as nursery provisions. These factors contributed to keep women labourers from coming to the Malay Peninsula in the nineteenth century. However this situation changed as the colonial government and the government of India realised the implications of such a pattern of immigration. Thus in

the early 1920's both these governments attempted to correct the imbalance.

Indian women in the plantation sector began to be of some significance only in the late 1920's. Women workers made up 25 to 45 per cent of the total Indian labour force in the Malay states, and of these more than 80 per cent were in the agricultural sector.

(Sandhu, 1969 : 245)

The first permanent female emigrants were mainly the wives and young daughters of the male workers who were allowed and offered estate work. These women procreated and brought up their sons and daughters in the sub-culture environment of the estates. Few broke away from this web as the plantation system was such that it functioned on a closed social system which effectively cut off its members from the mainstream of the wider society. This is noted by R.K. Jain (1970 : 295) :

Whether a person was born into or was introduced into it as an emigrant, he found it difficult to escape the closed world of the estate.

Henceforth, family life became the norm in these plantation societies which, in turn, helped to stabilise the labour force. The women played a major role in the process of socialisation and upbringing of their offsprings. Their traditional social norms, beliefs and practices were passed down to the subsequent generations of Indians thereby maintaining their traditional social identity to a certain extent. However, certain norms and

values have been lost or modified but several have remained through the ages and are still widely and clearly evident among the inhabitants of the plantations in Malaysia today.

of them moving from one estate to another has been an avenue to improve their living standards. A majority of them were born in Malaysia and are also familiar with estate work because they have been exposed to such work since childhood. Many had been working for a full wage since they were teenagers while several had assisted their parents with estate work when they were young.

Employment for the majority of the working women was mainly a response to the need for supplementing the family income. 93 per cent of the respondents interviewed claimed that they went to work in the estate mainly to ease the financial burden of the family. Only 7 per cent stated that they wished to improve their own financial positions. Furthermore, 73 per cent of the women expressed a desire to stop working if and when their financial positions improve. The plight of Sugumari, exemplifies the the kind of financial predicament these women often face.

Sugumari is a 30 year old married woman who works as a worker in the estate. Since the day her husband was admitted to the General Hospital in Kuala Lumpur for

* All names given in this graduation exercise are pseudonyms.

3.2 Women and Estate Work

Most of the Indian women came to Ladang Cha'ah with their husbands or parents mainly from other estates. For many of them moving from one estate to another has been an avenue to improve their living standards. A majority of them were born in Malaysia and are also familiar with estate work because they have been exposed to such work since childhood. Many had been working for a full wage since they were teenagers while several had assisted their parents with estate work when they were young.

Employment for the majority of the working women was mainly a response to the need for supplementing the family income. 93 per cent of the respondents interviewed claimed that they went to work in the estate mainly to ease the financial burden of the family. Only 7 per cent stated that they wished to improve their own financial positions. Furthermore 73 per cent of the women expressed a desire to stop working if and when their financial positions improve. The plight of Sugumari, exemplifies the the kind of financial predicament these women often face.

Sugumari is a 30 year old married woman who works as a weeder in the estate. Since the day her husband was admitted to the General Hospital in Kuala Lumpur for

* All names given in this graduation exercise are pseudonyms.

a major surgery, she has been the sole cash income earner for her family which includes four school-going children. Apart from having to cope with the household expenditure on her meagre salary, she is also faced with the added task of having to meet the medical and travelling expenses due to her husband's hospitalisation. Sugumari has exhausted all her savings and jewellery in trying to cope with this situation. Besides that, she is also running high on debts.

This particular case study is but one of the numerous cases of women faced with trying situations in living and earning low wages in an estate. Therefore it is safe to assume that in many cases the economic contribution of these women is absolutely essential in maintaining their respective households, even though the majority of these women earn low wages. Usually the income earned by these women constitute around 30 to 40 per cent of the total family income.

Normally the income of all the working members in the family is handed to the head of the household, who is responsible for handling all household expenditures. In most cases the head of the households were predominantly men, except in families where there is an absence of a male spouse. In such instances, women

functioned as head of households, thereby controlling income and expenditure. Only in one case was there a dominant female head of household despite the presence of a working husband. Therefore, it can be said that the economic power of these working women in their respective families is minimal despite their substantial earning capacity. This trend was also observed by Oorjitham in her research on the Indian plantation women:

The familial role of working women are still dominant while their economic role is underplayed. Even though they earn a wage, these wages are strongly controlled by their husbands who are still the heads of households. Decision making and ultimate authority in all matters still largely rests in the hands of the menfolk except for a small percentage of women headed families.

(Oorjitham, 1983 :12)

Out of the 15 working respondents, 9 women gave their entire earnings to their husbands or parents while another 4 handled family expenditure together with their spouses. Only 2 of the respondents had full control over the family earnings. Thus, it is seen that 60 per cent of these working women contributed their entire earnings to their families while the rest received a very minimal sum for personal expenses.

Economic contribution towards the household income is also made by non-working women. Some of these women do indulge in income generating efforts during their free-time. This includes tailoring, selling

cakes/cookies as well as being sales agents for various household items. Normally they earn fifty to seventy ringgit by these efforts. In most cases the money is used to purchase household items.

Amongst the various occupations in Ladang Cha'ah, women normally occupy the lower paid jobs. The majority of the women are unskilled and therefore are ill-equipped to handle skilled and semi-skilled jobs. The following table shows the division of labour between the two sexes in Ladang Cha'ah.

OCCUPATION	FEMALE		MALE		TOTAL
	INDIANS	OTHER	INDIANS	OTHER	
MANAGERIAL	2	1	0	0	3
STAFF	19	4	0	0	23
SKILLED	7	5	2	5	17
OIL PALM HARVESTERS	46	17	0	0	63
OIL PALM CARRIERS	1	0	14	11	26
STRAYERS	3	1	3	14	21
WEDGERS	0	1	9	20	30
HANDLING CARGO	0	0	13	9	22
GENERAL WORKERS	7	3	5	8	17
CHIEF ASSISTANTS	0	0	1	1	2
DRIVERS	11	11	0	0	22

It is evident from the table that the majority of unskilled labour in Ladang Cha'ah are women. Not a single woman is employed in the managerial and staff category. Women are usually employed as oil palm

TABLE 3 : OCCUPATIONAL BREAKDOWN OF WORKERS
IN LADANG CHA'AH

OCCUPATION	MALE		FEMALE		TOTAL
	INDIANS	OTHER RACES	INDIANS	OTHER RACES	
MANAGERIAL	2	1	0	0	3
STAFF	10	4	0	0	14
MANDORES	7	5	2	3	17
OIL PALM HARVESTERS	46	37	0	0	83
OIL PALM CARRIERS	1	0	34	22	57
SPRAYERS	0	1	5	14	20
WEEDERS	0	3	7	20	30
MANURING GANG	0	0	13	9	22
GENERAL WORKERS	0	2	6	9	17
CRECHE ASSISTANTS	0	0	1	1	2
DRIVERS	12	12	0	0	24

It is evident from the table that the majority of unskilled labourers in Ladang Cha'ah are women. Not a single woman is employed in the managerial and staff category. Women are usually employed as oil palm

carriers, sprayers, weeders, manuring gang, general workers and as creche assistants. These positions are seldom occupied by the male workers. Normally the male workers are employed as oil palm harvesters and drivers which requires a certain amount of skill. Furthermore these jobs are considered too heavy to be handled by women. Women are perceived to be unequal to men hence, they are pushed into the lower side of productivity. This is indeed an existing fact in the agricultural sector. However it is evident that women too handle a lot of heavy tasks. The duties of the oil palm carriers, sprayers and the manuring gang can be considered just as physically demanding as that of the harvesters.

Women constitute a readily available cheap source of labour located on the plantations themselves. At other times they can be easily retrenched or forced to accept unskilled, low paying jobs without fear of much protest. Some gender based excuse like female physical weakness and pregnancy were used to influence these decisions.

(Oorjitham, 1983 :10)

Thus it can be said that given the opportunity these women should be able to handle most jobs that are presently the domain of their male counterparts.

In terms of income, the jobs that these women do are usually the ones that are lower paid. The average monthly income of sprayers, weeders, manuring gang and general workers is about \$244, while oil palm carriers

earn around \$367 monthly. In contrast the jobs that the male workers do are better paid, for example oil palm harvesters earn around \$595 while drivers earn about \$632. Also there is a discrepancy in wage paid for male and female workers doing the same job as in the case of mandores where the female mandores earn about \$100 less than the male mandores, though the duties assigned to them are essentially the same (See Table 4).

TABLE 4 : AVERAGE MONTHLY INCOME OF LABOURERS

OCCUPATION	INCOME (MALE)	INCOME (FEMALE)
MANDORES	\$387	\$283
OIL PALM HARVESTERS	\$595	-
OIL PALM CARRIERS	-	\$367
SPRAYERS	\$270	\$270
WEEDERS	\$244	\$244
MANURING GANG	-	\$244
GENERAL WORKERS	\$244	\$244
CRECHE ASSISTANTS	-	\$257
DRIVERS	\$632	-

Out of the 15 working women selected for detailed study, 6 were employed as weeders, 3 as oil palm carriers, 2 as sprayers, 1 as a general worker another as a creche

assistant while only 2 were employed as mandores (See Table 5).

TABLE 5 : OCCUPATIONAL BREAKDOWN OF RESPONDENTS

OCCUPATION	NUMBER	%
WEEDERS	6	40
OIL PALM CARRIERS	3	20
SPRAYERS	2	13
MANDORES	2	13
GENERAL WORKERS	1	7
CRECHE ASSISTANTS	1	7
TOTAL	15	100

For all these women, their day begins at dawn. Most of them wake up between 5 to 5.30 am. After breakfast, they dress for work, usually wearing two to three layers of clothing as protection from the blazing sun and knee length boots which are suitable for estate work. By 6.15 am they assemble in front of the Divisional Office where their attendance is taken. By 6.45 am they are sent to their respective places of work, either by trailers or by motorcycles, riding pillion with their husbands or children.

Working hours are long and tiring. Except for an hours' break for lunch, the women workers have to be on their feet the whole day. While at work they must be on guard at all times as the mandores, field conductors and occasionally the senior assistants or the manager himself are on patrol, making sure that no one is idling on the job. The task designated to these women can be considered quite tough. They are expected to carry heavy loads in the course of performing their duties. For example, those who work with the manuring gang have to carry the heavy bags of manure while the sprayers have to carry the heavy spray-pumps on their backs. Most of the times they have to cover a very large area within the stipulated working hours carrying these heavy loads. Furthermore, the scorching sun and at times heavy rain does not make their tasks any easier. Moreover, the trailers that are supposed to pick them up after work at 2.30 pm are not always on time. Occasionally they have to wait for hours stranded at their work site.

Besides all these, the women also have to contend with various occupational hazards. Boarding the trailers and lorries that take them to their places of work is by itself a difficult task. Since these trailers and lorries are quite high, women have to climb up these vehicles by themselves and a small slip can result in

bodily injury. In addition, travelling in these vehicles can be very hazardous particularly to pregnant women. The drivers usually travel very fast regardless of the potential danger to women passengers in their vehicles in the event of an accident.

In the fields the use of pesticides poses another potential hazard. Though these women are provided with adequate protective gear, they are however quite ignorant with regards to its importance and as such normally neglect using them. Furthermore, the management does not strictly enforce the usage of these protective gears. As a result of this negligence, the constant exposure to such toxic chemicals could lead to various forms of health problems notably skin and respiratory ailments. These workers are also exposed to various natural hazards in the fields. This might be in the form of poisonous snakes, scorpions, centipedes, wild boars and even wild elephants.

Bearing in mind all these hazards that women workers face daily, the management has made efforts to ensure proper medical attention for them. For example, it is compulsory for sprayers to undergo a monthly medical check-up at the estate's clinic. However, how far these check-ups are complete and reliable is not known. In the event of a major accident patients must be

sent to a nearest district hospital which is more than 40 kilometres away. Thus the adequacy of the medical facilities provided is questionable.

In the event of serious injuries or disablement due to accidents at work, most of the women workers were unaware of the proper procedures involved in making compensatory claims. Furthermore, not a single respondent was aware of their rights as provided by the Employment Act, 1955 (Act 265).

- i) Full-time housewives
- ii) Working women

In Ladang Cha'ah, the wives of the management staff were all full-time housewives, as such they were normally the prime domestic workers in their homes. Though these women have to deal with the same amount of domestic chores as the second category, they can be considered better off than the labour class. This is because they are in a position to employ a domestic helper usually from the labour class if they so desire. They can also afford to buy various labour and time saving appliances to ease their domestic work load such as washing machines, microwave ovens, blenders, etc. Furthermore, the management provides this category with a general worker who handles the gardening and general maintenance

3.3 Women and Domestic Work

Domestic labour can be defined as the work necessary for the maintenance of a home. This would include the raising of children, cooking, cleaning, laundering, etc. In this context it can be said that all respondents were domestic workers. The only differences that existed among these respondents were that some of them had the added responsibility of being wage earners as well. Women involved with domestic labour in Ladang Cha'ah can be divided into two categories namely;

- i) Full-time housewives
- ii) Working women

In Ladang Cha'ah, the wives of the management staff were all full-time housewives. As such they were normally the prime domestic workers in their homes. Though these women have to cope with the same amount of domestic chores as the second category, they can be considered better off than the labour class. This is because they are in a position to employ a domestic helper usually from the labour class if they so desire. They can also afford to buy various labour and time saving appliances to ease their domestic work load such as washing machines, microwave ovens, blenders, etc. Furthermore, the management provides this category with a general worker who handles the gardening and general maintenance

work around the house. In addition, the management also provides special allowance for post-natal women to employ domestic servants. A day in the life of Padmini, the wife of a senior field conductor, can be applied to describe women in this category.

Padmini's day begins around six to seven in the morning. Her first duty for the day would be to prepare breakfast for her family which includes her husband and her school-going son. Most of Padmini's household chores are left to the responsibility of a young girl, a Form three drop-out, whom she has adopted. The girl is the daughter of a labourer in the estate. The duties of this young girl includes cleaning, washing and assisting Padmini in the kitchen. For Padmini, her mornings are spent in the kitchen, cooking for her family. Normally this is accomplished by eleven thirty am. From then on, Padmini is usually quite free. She takes a nap in the afternoons while her evenings are spent gardening, reading newspapers, watching television or video programmes. Besides this, she occasionally prepares snacks for tea and cooks dinner. Padmini goes to bed at around eleven o'clock.

The preceding case-study shows that the women from the higher economic strata within the estate, have more time

in hand as well as are financially equipped to ease their domestic work-load. In Padmini's case, her husband earns \$1000 - \$1200 per month and they do maintain an expensive life-style. For instance, Padmini and her family have travelled throughout Malaysia as well as Singapore, Sri Lanka and India. She also has a daughter studying abroad. In addition, Padmini has an expensive hobby collecting statues, antiques, brass and silverwares. Thus for these women of the staff class, their husbands were the source of economic security and social status. Their self-identity depends on the social position of their husbands.

In contrast, housewives from the labour class do not enjoy such high social status. Though they do have ample time to accomplish all household chores at their own pace, they are not financially equipped to employ domestic help or to buy labour saving appliances. As such they usually have to manage household chores on their own. The following case-study on Indra clearly depicts how housewives from the labour-class handle their domestic chores.

Indra's husband, as well as her three school-going children have to leave the house by six am. As such, she has to make sure that breakfast is ready for everyone by five forty-five am. In addition, she also

has to prepare and pack snacks for them. Thus this is her first duty for the day. Once they leave, Indra goes back to bed and gets up again only at around eight thirty am. Then onwards, she begins tackling all other chores for the day. This includes caring for her one year old son as well as cooking, washing clothes and general house cleaning. Normally she completes her work by one pm. Once she has put her son to bed for his afternoon nap, she does a little sewing while waiting for her husband and children to return home. After having lunch with her family she washes up and takes a nap till four pm. The next two hours are spent preparing tea for her family as well as bathing her children and folding clothes. Usually she is quite free from six thirty pm onwards and she spends her time talking with her neighbours or watching television. Once dinner is over, she does the dishes and sews till around eleven or midnight.

Therefore it can be seen that for non-working women from the labour-group, time is seldom a problem and in fact they do have sufficient leisure time. In Indra's case, she spends her leisure hours rather constructively as the sewing she does for her neighbours generates an income of \$20 - \$30 monthly.

As for working women from the labour class, their tasks are significantly heavier. They play a dual role in their respective families as they are the prime domestic workers in their homes as well as being income earners for the family. The pressures on these women are greater because they now have to exert so much more to keep their household and their jobs running smoothly. Psychologically too, these women are under intense stress and strain, associated with this double responsibility. The hectic daily routine of Bharathi, a sprayer in the estate is representative of women in this category.

From the moment she comes back from work, Bharathi has hardly any time to rest. Since all her four children are schooling in the afternoon, she has no one to assist her in her domestic chores. She begins her task by making the beds which is followed by cleaning, washing dishes and doing the laundry. All these tasks take about three hours and from five thirty onwards she has to start preparing the family meal. Once that is done, she has just enough time to have her bath and conduct her daily prayer, before starting to serve dinner for her family. After doing the dishes, Bharathi's final chore for the day would be to collect and fold the clothes that had been put

to dry. She is normally free after ten pm and though she does spend time in front of the television, usually she is too exhausted to enjoy the T.V. programmes. Furthermore, she has to retire to bed by eleven as she has to be up as early as five in the following morning.

In comparison to full-time housewives, it is obvious that working women from the labour class have hardly any time for little else except work the whole day. Their position is further aggravated by their low financial status, since they are unable to employ any domestic helpers even though it is absolutely necessary in some cases. Except for some women who have older children to assist with housework, most of them have to manage all domestic chores on their own. Furthermore, besides the mandatory maternity leave and allowance, the management does not provide any special allowance during post-natal periods as in the case of women who are wives of management staff. Most of the working women in Ladang Cha'ah had a relatively similar pattern of daily routine. This is described in Table 6.

TABLE 6 : DAILY ROUTINE FOR WORKING WOMEN

TIME	ACTIVITY
5.00 am - 5.30 am	Waking hour
5.30 am - 6.00 am	Breakfast, Pack lunch for work, Dress for work
6.00 am - 6.30 am	Report for duty at Divisional Office
6.30 am - 6.45 am	Leave for place of work
6.45 am - 7.00 am	Work begins in the field
11.30 am - 12.00 pm	Lunch break
2.30 pm	Work ends
2.30 pm - 3.00 pm	Tea and short rest or nap
3.00 pm - 4.30 pm	Washing clothes/dishes, general cleaning
4.30 pm - 6.00 pm	Cooking
6.00 pm - 8.00 pm	Bath, Prayers, Watering Plants, Gardening
8.00 pm - 9.00 pm	Dinner, Wash Dishes, Put children to bed
9.00 pm - 11.00 pm	Leisure, T.V./video or reading papers, etc.
11.00 pm - 11.30 pm	Retire to bed

It is thus clear that women play a major role in the day to day running of the household. As such their role as a domestic worker is that of utmost importance for the smooth maintenance of the family even

when participating in economic production. However this role places on them a whole range of restrictions with regards to their interaction with the wider society as in the case of working women of the labour group. As for non-working women of the labour class, it is more a problem of financial constraints and lack of mobility. Rohana Ariffin also expressed the preceeding situation very succintly in a paper entitled "Exploitation of Women" :

Being a full-time housewife is hard work but not challenging mentally. Doing work within the four walls of the house does not provide much stimulus of wider interest outside the house. Domestic activities are of very limited range that do not allow for much expression of qualities of intellect or personality ... The restriction of the housewife could thus be more of a psychological nature than a physical one. A housewife does not develop personally because of the lack of stimulating environment and the limited nature of housework.

(Rohana Ariffin, 1979 : 5)

However, the problems of the labour class women are usually not faced by the women of the staff class as they have the financial means as well as the physical mobility to participate and interact in wider society beyond the borders of the estate.

3.4 Women And Leisure

Leisure activities for the women of this estate range from listening to the radio, watching television or video programmes, gardening, sewing, reading newspapers or magazines and playing with young ones. Besides this, some do spend their leisure time shopping or visiting friends or neighbours while others indulge in such creative hobbies as floral arrangements, crochet, knitting, macrami and so on.

Around one fourth of the respondents were quite involved in religious activities and normally spent most of their leisure hours attending religious functions and gatherings. To these women, such functions served a dual purpose as they are not only performing their religious duties but they can also use this opportunity to socialize with other people from the same or different estates. Tabulated below are the various forms of leisure activities for women in Ladang Cha'ah.

TABLE 7 : LEISURE ACTIVITY AMONG RESPONDENTS

LEISURE ACTIVITY	NO. OF RESPONDENTS	%
TV/VIDEO/RADIO	44	98
NEWSPAPERS/MAGAZINES	29	64
GARDENING	19	42
SEWING	15	33
CROCHET/MACRAMI	3	6
BAKING	2	4
GAMES/SPORTS	0	0
POLITICS	0	0
RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY	11	24
VISITING FRIENDS/ RELATIVES	9	20
TRAVELLING	10	22

It was found that none of the respondents were involved in any form of sports activities. Though a majority of them were members of the National Union of Plantation Workers (NUPW), none were directly involved nor showed keen interest in Union activities. In fact 60 per cent of the respondents were completely ignorant of the functions and activities of the NUPW. Most of them were members only because they hoped to get some form of financial aid for their school-going children. As for

politics the only form of participation observed was being docile members of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) and voting in the General Elections. Besides that, most of them knew next to nothing about politics.

Women in the plantation sector do not participate as actively, as do their men in affairs outside the home like politics and labour unions. Their participation is always hindered by male dominance in these organizations, such that their roles here are never given consideration. Furthermore women have little time or energy to spare to participate actively in these movements.

(Oorjitham, 1983 :13)

The economic positions of women in Ladang Cha'ah play a major role in determining their leisure activities. The following two case studies shows some of the differences that exist between women of the staff and labour class in terms of leisure activities.

CASE 1 :

Sarojini is the spouse of an estate staff. Being a full-time housewife, Sarojini does have a lot of free-time in hand. For her and her family leisure usually means travelling out of the estate since they have a family car. This includes visiting friends or relatives in nearby towns and holidaying to other parts of the country. In addition she has also travelled abroad with her family. When not travelling, Sarojini's leisure hours are spent knitting, gardening or watching television/video

programmes. At times she accompanies her husband to the club-house in the estate which is exclusive for members of the management staff only.

CASE 2 :

For Kamala, the wife of a harvester, her life mainly revolves around her husband and five children. Being a full-time housewife she does have a lot of leisure time. Her leisure activities are mainly watching television or video programmes, besides doing a little gardening. Though she likes to travel to visit her friends and relatives or just for holiday purposes, she is not able to do so due to financial constraints. In fact, she hardly ventures out of the estate with or without her family except on rare occasions like during the festive seasons. Furthermore, a major portion of her leisure period is spent on making and selling ice-cream and Indian delicacies. She does this in an effort to supplement the family income since it is quite difficult for her to be a full-time wage earner as she is a sickly person and has five young children to take care of at home.

From these two case studies, it can be assumed that travelling is one of the major forms of leisure activity for women of the higher economic strata within the

estate. In most cases, women from this group do travel quite frequently either for shopping or visiting purposes. Distance and the rather remote setting of the estate is not a problem for the majority of them since their spouses usually owned cars. In the case of women from the labour group, their leisure activities are normally confined within the boundaries of the estate. Even though many had expressed the desire to travel out of the estate, in most cases they neither possessed cars nor the financial means to do so. Hence, it is evident that the economic background of these women play an important role in the kind of activity they indulge in.

CHAPTER 4

4.

WOMEN AND EDUCATION

4.1 Introduction

Education here refers essentially to the process of formal instruction which is carried out in institutions of learning such as schools, colleges and universities. Thus, education in this context means educational attainment or more specifically the number of years schooling a person has completed. It may also refer to the certificates, diploma or degrees he has obtained during the process. Educational attainment in this sense has generally been very poor among the Indians of the plantation sector in Malaysia. Studies conducted by the government e.g. Murad Report and socio-economic studies by the Socio-economic Research Unit (SERU) have indicated that the lowest rate in school registration and the highest drop-out rates were among the Indians in Malaysia.

The drop-out rate within the primary school years is substantially higher than the other two groups; more Indian youths drop out during the primary school years than do Malay or Chinese youths.

(Murad Report, 1973 :19)

The educational problems of the Indians are closely related to the socio-economic problems that are encountered by this community (See Marimuthu, 1981 : 3).

This chapter will attempt to discuss the educational attainment of the Indian women in Ladang Cha'ah in relation to these socio-economic problems.

From the fact that only 27 per cent of my respondents had gone beyond the primary level of education. In addition, out of the remaining 73 per cent, about 60 per cent have either completed their primary education or have had some years of primary schooling while the rest had no form of formal education at all. Furthermore, from the 27 per cent of respondents who had reached secondary education, none have passed the Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE) or gone beyond Form Five (See Table 3).

TABLE 3 : EDUCATIONAL LEVEL AMONG THE
INDIAN WOMEN

EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	NO. OF RESPONDENTS	%
TERTIARY	0	0
UPPER SECONDARY	1	2
LOWER SECONDARY	11	25
PRIMARY (ENGLISH MEDIUM)	5	11
PRIMARY (TAMIL MEDIUM)	22	49
NO SCHOOLING	6	13
TOTAL	45	100

4.2 Educational Attainment of Respondents

In general the educational attainment among most of my respondents was quite low. This is evident from the fact that only 27 per cent of my respondents had gone beyond the primary level of education. In addition, out of the remaining 73 per cent, about 60 per cent have either completed their primary education or have had some years of primary schooling while the rest had no form of formal education at all. Furthermore from the 27 per cent of respondents who had reached secondary education, none have passed the Malaysian Certificate of Education (MCE) or gone beyond Form Five (See Table 8).

TABLE 8 : EDUCATIONAL LEVEL AMONG THE SAMPLE WOMEN

EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	NO. OF RESPONDENTS	%
TERTIARY	0	0
UPPER SECONDARY	1	2
LOWER SECONDARY	11	25
PRIMARY (ENGLISH MEDIUM)	5	11
PRIMARY (TAMIL MEDIUM)	22	49
NO SCHOOLING	6	13
TOTAL	45	100

Differences in educational achievement was also observed between the women of the staff class and the labour class. This is indicated in the table below.

TABLE 9 : EDUCATIONAL LEVEL BETWEEN THE LABOUR CLASS AND THE STAFF CLASS

EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	LABOUR CLASS	%	STAFF CLASS	%
TERTIARY	0	0	0	0
UPPER SECONDARY	0	0	1	7
LOWER SECONDARY	7	23	4	27
PRIMARY (ENGLISH MEDIUM)	1	4	4	27
PRIMARY (TAMIL MEDIUM)	16	53	6	39
NO SCHOOLING	6	27	0	0
TOTAL	30	100	15	100

Table 9 shows the educational attainment of women of the staff group was higher than that of the labour group. While all respondents of the staff class have had some form of formal schooling, it was found that about 20 per cent of the labour class have never been to school. There are also evident variations in type of schools attended between the 2 classes of respondents. A higher percentage of women from the staff group as compared

with women of the labour group have attended English medium schools, while a majority of women from the labour class have attended Tamil medium schools. This difference is closely related to the place of origin of respondents. It was found that 84 per cent of the respondents originated from rural areas while from the remaining 16 per cent who originated from urban areas, a majority of them were from the staff group (See Table 10). Those who came from urban areas attended schools which were normally better facilitated compared to the schools in rural areas. This factor naturally has a corresponding effect on educational achievements.

TABLE 10 : FORMER ENVIRONMENT OF ORIGIN

ENVIRONMENT	LABOUR CLASS	%	STAFF CLASS	%
RURAL	28	93	10	67
URBAN	2	7	5	33
TOTAL	30	100	15	100

Therefore two conclusions from the data given thus far is that the educational achievements of women from Ladang Cha'ah is generally low and that there is a noticeable discrepancy in terms of educational

attainment between the women from the staff and labour group. The following section will discuss the possible reasons contributing to this situation. Only related to their socio-economic background. Poverty combined with the poor facilities of the schools attended among other reasons produced an educational climate which can only be described as inadequate. It is in this socio-economic context that each of these problems will be treated.

4.3.1 Poverty

The predominant factor affecting the educational attainment of women from Ladang Cha'ah is poverty. This is evident from the fact that the majority of respondents came from very poor families. As such their parents were financially handicapped to provide them with a sound education. This is substantiated by the fact that among the six respondents who had never been to school, five gave poverty as the main reason. Furthermore, the majority of respondents who had to stop schooling either after completing their primary education or after a few years at that level, cited financial difficulty as the main cause. In the case of the five illiterate women, all of them had to work to supplement the meagre family income by the time they were around ten years old. Besides that, these women were also burdened with various household chores at this

4.3 Factors Affecting Educational Attainment

Basically the level of educational achievement among women of Ladang Cha'ah is closely related to their socio-economic background. Poverty combined with the poor facilities of the schools attended among other reasons produced an educational climate which can only be described as inadequate. It is in this socio-economic context that each of these problems will be viewed.

4.3.1 Poverty

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tender age. Even those who had the privilege of going to school were not spared from doing household chores after school hours. Domestic chores like collecting firewood, fetching water from wells or rivers, washing, cleaning, cooking, taking food and water to parents in their places of work, caring for younger siblings and so on were more often than not left to the responsibility of these young women. These women had no choice but to assist in the household chores out of sheer economic necessity. Being burdened by such heavy duties, many of these women had to forego education and even for those who had the opportunity to attend school, many were forced to quit after a few years due to parental pressure, as they were required to alleviate the heavy domestic work-load at home.

In some cases unforeseen circumstances such as the death of a sole income earner in the family had a major implication on the educational achievements of these women. For instance, the story of Radha who became a victim of such a circumstance :

Radha who was attending school, had to quit after the sudden death of her father, who was the sole bread winner for her family. With his death, her mother could not cope with the heavy burden of supporting the education of Radha and her brothers. In the

beginning, Radha was responsible for handling all the household chores while her mother and brothers went to work. After a few years, Radha too started working in an effort to supplement the family income and she has been working ever since. Radha who is a 34 year old married woman now has 5 school-going children. For Radha, her illiterate state has been a handicap in many situations in her life and as such she vows that she would ensure that her children are not deprived of a sound education. "I do not want my children to end up like me suffering in an estate", she says.

Radha's story is an indication of how some women were deprived of a sound education due to poverty. Another respondent gave a different version as to why she quit school at 10 years of age.

Saro's parents were very poor and they toiled the fields all day to feed her and her 12 brothers and sisters. Saro remembers her poor economic background very vividly as she was teased in her school by other children for wearing torn uniform and shoes and she often got into fights with her school-mates for teasing her. Being unable to cope with this teasing and subsequent fights, she finally quit after 4 years of school. Saro can read a little but she cannot

write at all. For her the four years she spent in school was hardly an education at all. All she has are bitter memories of her school-going days.

The different stories related by Radha and Saro shows that some women were deprived of an education through no fault of their own. They were just unfortunate to be born into poor families or were victims of fate. Thus it can be seen that poverty is an important factor for the high illiteracy and drop out rates among the Indian women respondents. This poor financial background inadvertently leads to poor diets and consequently adverse health conditions. More often than not malnutrition and worm infestations are rampant among these poor families, thereby affecting their physical and intellectual development (Marimuthu, 1981 : 4).

4.3.2 Inadequate Educational Facilities

Schools, being the microcosm of society, mirror the values, aspirations and hopes of the community in which they are located. For a large majority of my respondents, formal education began in Tamil medium schools. Since the majority of these Tamil schools are isolated in the plantations, they tend to be enmeshed in the culture of the plantation. These schools were usually small and had sub-standard and insufficient educational facilities. The teachers employed in these

schools usually had poor qualifications and inadequate training. Arasaratnam (1970) stated in his book "History of Indians in Malaysia and Singapore" that,

Very few estates would undergo the expenditure of employing teachers. Clerks, kanganys and even literate labourers would function as part-time teachers.

(Arasaratnam, 1970 :26)

Tamil schools were so scattered in separate plantation worlds that initially it was considered impractical to recruit competent teachers part-time while permanent postings was considered uneconomical. Even in cases where a permanent qualified teacher was employed, the phenomenon of a single teacher minding multiple classes prevailed. Further, there was seldom any systematic organization in most of these schools. This was aptly described in the book "Malaysia's Forgotten People" by Colleta which discusses the anomalies in the organization of the Tamil Vernacular schools.

There are usually no libraries or reading rooms. Teachers keep a handful of text in their classroom cupboards to be drawn and shared, but even these books are out-dated and insufficient in number. In observing the teaching-learning dynamics of the classroom, it appears that what is learnt in a "rote" fashion, in an authoritarian manner, and often is wiped out through lack of secondary enforcement in the home environment.

(Colleta, 1975 : 100)

For those who survived through this adverse educational climate in the primary level, adapting into the English medium secondary schools posed a major problem. These

women were faced with the problem of having to adapt to the linguistic differences as well as the multi-ethnic nature of the secondary schools. Among the 12 respondents who reached the secondary level, 9 received their primary education in Tamil medium schools. Among these none made it into the upper secondary and each of them expressed the inability to adapt to the entirely new educational environment as the main cause for their failure. Most of them also added that the Remove classes they attended did not prepare them adequately to face the multi aspects of Secondary education. This situation is clearly described in the article entitled "Multilingual Education : the Disinheritance of the Tamil Workers' Child" by S.M.Ponniah who stated :

These Tamil children who have but a very limited and widely disparity command of English are admitted to Remove classes to intensively study English under teachers ill-qualified for such specialized teaching. Obviously, these pupils start their secondary school lives with a considerable handicap. Hardly understanding even the language in which they are taught, they drift on to Form Three where they invariably drop out before the completion of even their Lower Secondary education.

(S.M.Ponniah, 1976 : 65)

The only respondent who made it to the Upper Secondary did not pass the M.C.E. despite being privileged with English medium education throughout her schooling years.

Hence it can be concluded that the inadequacy of the Tamil Vernacular schools has proved to be a major

hindrance in the pursuit of education for these women. Besides this, a vast majority of these women who enter schools are ill-prepared for school in terms of entering behaviour such as the minimum social linguistic, cognitive and motor skills required owing to their unfavourable socio-economic background. In addition the unfavourable attitudes of parents towards education does not help in providing the right kind of stimulus for these women in achieving educational excellence. The following section would deal with these prevalent social attitudes among plantation families.

4.3.3 Social Attitudes

For a large majority of the respondents who started Primary education, there was an absence of the environmental stimulus or push as parental interest in education was low. This was also observed by Daniel (1981) where he states,

Most Indian parents of the estate do not provide motivation nor the necessary stimulation to enhance the educational achievement of the child.

(Daniel, 1981 : 84)

Therefore the primary school for most of them was their first experience and many are overwhelmed by the first day in school as they were ill-prepared for school in terms of entering behaviour. Besides this, some parents viewed the school in an entirely different perspective than that of an institute for education. For them,

sending their daughters to school was merely to have them looked after while they were working in the fields. Owing to their low socio-economic status, the school in the plantations are viewed merely as an extension of the creche.

The Tamil schools in the plantations perform a custodial function (or the function of a gate-keeper when the parents are away in the fields) rather than an instrumental function of facilitating social mobility. Parents, teachers and pupils view the function of the school in this manner - a sojourn in the life-cycle of the plantation worker.

(Marimuthu, 1981 : 5)

In addition, some parents felt that it was more important to educate the male siblings because they were perceived as the future bread-winners, while their daughters were viewed merely as future wives and mothers. If a choice has to be made in a family because of limited finances, the chances are that the boys will be allowed to continue schooling and the girls' education sacrificed. The girls were then often kept at home to assist in the household chores.

Shantira who is one of the illiterate respondents in Ladang Cha'ah did not have the opportunity to attend school because her parents did not consider educating her necessary. Owing to their low economic status, they only sent her brother to school. As for Shantira, she was kept at home under the close supervision of her mother who taught her how to be a good housewife and mother.

Shantira who now works as an oil palm carrier in Ladang Cha'ah regrets that she was not given an opportunity to undergo formal education. Her only wish is that her four school-going children are not deprived of the opportunity to go to school for any reason. However as far as Shantira is concerned, she feels that she has done her part in sending her children to school. Apart from nagging them to study daily, Shantira can do little else in motivating her children due to her illiterate state. It was also noticed that her home environment was not conducive for studying. Except for basic living furniture there was no proper place to study. Furthermore, the house was usually very noisy and the children had to do their studies sitting on the floor.

The above case depicts a common attitude of respondents when it comes to educating their children. Just like their own parents, these women lack proper attitude in educating their children. Though most of the respondents are now better aware of the importance of a sound education, they still fail to realise the important role of parents in inculcating a good attitude towards education among their children. Very often poor parents think that they are unable to help their children because they themselves are not educated. Normally these school-going children of the plantation

lack parental guidance and thus their progress in school is left to their own initiative. Research evidence (See Marimuthu,1981) show that children perform better when parents show greater concern and interest in their childrens' education.

Parental interest in education is low. There is an absence of a proper place to study, the house is overcrowded, dimly lit, noisy, constant quarrels at home leading to family disorganization and discord and there is an absence of intellectual stimulus (in terms of availability of newspapers, magazines, books, etc.) and interaction. The children are largely left to their own choices. No extra educational support is available. The children grope in darkness that surrounds them.

(Marimuthu,1981 :8)

Other reasons given by respondents which prevented them from continuing their education include parent-teacher disputes, early marriages as well as personal involvement with male teachers. Thus it can be seen that these unfavourable social attitudes among parents had an adverse effect on the educational attainment of respondents.

4.3.4 Physical Constraints

The location of schools also plays a vital role in the education of children from the plantations. In this aspect, one of the main problems faced by plantation children is that after primary education, they have to go to secondary schools which are usually located outside the borders of the plantations. In most

cases these schools are located fifteen to twenty miles away. A few respondents claimed that this distance was the major barrier in preventing them from furthering their secondary education. Ten respondents who quit school after Standard Six revealed that one of the reasons for them to stop schooling was because the nearest Secondary schools were many miles away. Since their parents could not afford to meet the daily travelling expenses, many respondents had no choice but to quit. Furthermore, transport services in and out of the estates were usually unreliable. In addition some of these estates are located in flood-prone areas and these women had problems in getting to school during the monsoon seasons. One respondent claimed that the estate where her parents lived was rather remote and during rainy seasons the road leading to the estate was often cut-off due to the floods. Fearing for her safety, her parents kept her away from school during these times. At times she had to miss classes for weeks at a stretch. This affected her performance in school and she finally quit after one and a half years in Secondary school.

Hence, physical constraints can also be considered to be a factor in affecting the educational attainment of respondents.

4.4 Conclusion

Low educational attainment has been one of the barriers in the advancement and progress of the Indian women of the plantations. Many of these women had to grow up in the confines of an estate environment, cooped up in a small world, left with little avenues for self-improvement. A few who came from urban areas had the opportunity to achieve a higher level of education and consequently they enjoyed a better standard of living, usually as wives of staffs. Such a disparity was studied by D.Jasbir Kaur in her article on "Differences of Educational Opportunity" where she concludes that girls attended schools in far less numbers than they should especially in the Vernacular schools. She further states that dropout/wastage was higher among Indian girls compared to Indian boys, while girls in the urban areas had a better chance of going to school than those in the rural areas (D.Jasbir Kaur, 1967 : 76).

Most respondents felt that their educational achievement played an important role in determining their life partner. For those who were illiterate or of low educational achievement, normally they married men with a similar or slightly higher educational background. These respondents married men from the same or nearby estates. Their children were brought up and

socialized with the same attitude and values as their own. This brought about a cultural continuity which has persisted through the ages. They also became fatalistic in their approach to life due to lack of social mobility. As a consequence, they tend to believe in supernatural powers to alleviate their sufferings, have reliance on others with authority, be oriented towards the present, possess low self-concept and motivation and feelings of helplessness and despair. Many are actually unaware of their subordinate status in their society and are oblivious to their exploited state. Tradition and religious beliefs strengthens and justifies their submissive and fatalistic attitudes.

It has now been established that women are in no way inferior to men and that the differences in their academic and professional achievements are due mainly to lack of adequate opportunities or to influence of traditional cultural patterns.

(Aggarwal, 1976 : 50)

The profit oriented capitalistic system on the other hand benefits highly due to the vulnerability of these women. Their low level of education is definitely an added advantage to this economic system.

CHAPTER 5

5. STATUS OF WOMEN

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will examine the status of the Indian women of the plantation in light of data discussed in the previous chapters and drawing from the theoretical perspectives reviewed in Chapter 1. In this context status refers to the position or rank of the Indian women in relation to others in their socio-economic existence. The basic contention of this research has been to show that the women in the estates suffer from low socio-economic status. This has been positively proven by the results of the present analysis in line with Neo-Marxist theories on the status of women in a capitalistic economy.

The ascription of gender roles to men and women directly distributes tasks and personality traits which give differential access to the scarce resources of society, producing conditions which reinforce the system of differentiation. This division of labour by sex which is a characteristic of all societies produces a system of gender-role stratification wherein men are assigned the positions of prestige and power, whilst the women are generally excluded from them.

(O'Brien, 1979 :14)

Most studies conducted on Indian women in Malaysia had shown that their secondary positions in the society are related to gender based ideologies, patriarchy and the

capitalistic system which allows for discriminatory structure in their socio-economic positions. In the following sections, it is these differences in status which will be explored in depth. male and female is in terms of super-ordinate and subordinate relations. This simply means that the Indian culture supports male dominance and female submissiveness. From young Indian girls are taught to associate values such as discipline, power and strength with male figures while women were usually associated with domestic work, childbearing, and areas related to it. Thus even in the process of their socialization they are inculcated with the values of male supremacy and female inferiority. This ideology is further strengthened by their religious beliefs.

The majority of the respondents were Hindus. It appears that the Indian culture is closely intertwined with Hinduism. In other words there is no clear line separating Hindu religion from Hindu culture. Patriarchal values are also practised in the temples and within the homes of the Hindu families. The Hindu Temple is a very important institution within most estates where various ceremonies and daily prayers are conducted. This includes rites pertaining to birth, death, puberty and marriage. In practically all religious ceremonies the menfolk are usually accorded

5.2 Status of Women and Indian Culture

Patriarchal overtones of the Indian culture strengthens the discrepancy of status between the sexes whereby relationships between male and female is in terms of super-ordinate and subordinate relations. This simply means that the Indian culture supports male dominance and female submissiveness. From young, Indian girls are taught to associate values such as discipline, power and strength with male figures while women were usually associated with domestic work, childbearing, and areas related to it. Thus even in the process of their socialization they are inculcated with the values of male supremacy and female inferiority. This ideology is further strengthened by their religious beliefs.

The majority of the respondents were Hindus. It appears that the Indian culture is closely intertwined with Hinduism. In other words there is no clear line separating Hindu religion from Hindu culture. Patriarchal values are also practised in the temples and within the homes of the Hindu families. The Hindu Temple is a very important institution within most estates where various ceremonies and daily prayers are conducted. This includes rites pertaining to birth, death, puberty and marriage. In practically all religious ceremonies the menfolk are usually accorded

the honour and respect in performing the rites and rituals. This is because women are often associated with 'impurities' and as such are not encouraged to participate directly in matters sanctioned by religion. Even within the homes of the Hindu families, usually the males are accorded a similar honour and respect. Hence, it can be seen that male supremacy is further propagated by Hindu religious practices. This places the Hindu woman in a secondary position. Although she may participate actively she can never acquire a religious status above that of a man. A surprising feature here is that in ancient India, in the early Vedic ages, women seem to have enjoyed equal rights with men. The wife and husband being equal half of one substance were regarded equal in every respect and both took equal part in all duties - religious and social. This is the idea expressed in Book 5, Hymn 61 and verse 8 of the Rig Veda. Thus it appears that the position of the Indian women has gradually eroded since the Vedic period. For example Kapur(1978 : 110) claims that:

Women by and large held equal status with men in the home and in society till 300 B.C. However due to certain socio-cultural and political factors, the status of the Indian women gradually began to decline after this period.

Kapur further states that the position of women in India began to improve around the beginning of the 19th cen-

tury due to the effort of social reformers and progressive religious leaders. However, the improvement in the situation of working class women was by comparison the slowest. As such, it is clear that the deteriorating status of women which occurred after the Vedic period is inherent in the present day Indian women of Malaysian plantations since they are descendants of this Tamil working class from India. Some of the traditional cultural and religious values and practices have hindered socio-economic progress and development of these women in the plantations. Unlike their sisters in the urban areas who are more prone to adaptations due to the process of industrialisation and modernisation, the women of the plantations are still strongly bound by the restrictions of traditional Indian culture. This has to a certain extent contributed towards the low status of women in the plantations.

5.3 Status of Women and Work

Though women had laboured outside and within the homes since time immemorial, they are seldom given the due recognition or rewards. Women today have become income earners and participate actively in production systems in the economy. However the traditional image of women as wives and mothers and that her place is in the home is to many an ideal image. Such a patriarchal ideology embedded within the Indian culture has complemented the capitalistic environment of the plantation industry in Malaysia. As Hartman (1976 : 157) states:

According to the patriarchal view, women's subordinate position in production and society generally derives from the desire of men to dominate women, and men's ability to create and perpetuate social institutions which support and enforce this social relation. In this view, the hierarchical sexual relations and structuring of society in which men oppress women, preceded the development of capitalism.

Patriarchal ideology declares that the man is the head of household. Though women have broken many a barrier in trying to achieve equal status with her male counterparts, this ideology still holds sway in many societies. This is evident among the Indians in the plantations. Women are still recognised based on their gender appropriate social roles as mother, wife and housekeeper. Her place is said to be the home and her duties to serve the men and to bear children. This ideology has

contributed to their relative powerlessness in their society. When women's activities were restricted to the home they become socially and economically dependent on their husbands and sons who were income earners for the families. Thus there was separation in roles where women functioned in the private domain while the men functioned in the public domain. Such differences based upon biological differences between men and women is known as "sex role" and "gender role" stratification. The active participation of men in the public domain further propagated their power and prestige while the women were subjugated to male dominance within their homes.

In Ladang Cha'ah the non-working women seem to suffer from a lower status compared to their working counterparts. This is because they were almost totally dependent on their husbands economically. This gives an added sense of power and authority to the working men as the very existence of their wives and children depends heavily on their financial contributions. Hence this allows for them to dictate and rule the lives of women under their care. Being in such a position some of these women were exploited and treated quite unfairly. Some of them have been victims of wife-battering, adultery and verbal assaults. Furthermore, in cases of violent fights

and brawls within the homes the women normally have to bear the brunt of the irresponsible actions of the menfolk. In addition, some women had to provide for the drinking and gambling habits of their husbands and at times also have to settle their debts. Thus it can be said that the domestic contributions of the non-working women of Ladang Cha'ah is not given due recognition. Most of the times, these women have to cope with the daily boring routine of housework all by themselves except in cases where there are older children to assist them. As for the men a vast majority of them are ashamed to indulge in any form of housework since it is considered to be rather unmasculine. Furthermore, the women themselves have been socialised to accept the fact that their primary role is that of a wife and mother. As such normally their contributions to household activities are taken for granted. Moreover, there is no monetary value placed on household chores and thus these full-time housewives receive neither pay, prestige nor power. On the other hand, the working women of Ladang Cha'ah can be considered to be of a slightly higher status than their non-working counterparts. Though these women are usually involved in low paying jobs, they are more economically independent.

The estate's occupational hierarchy can be conceived in terms of the Marxian scheme of "bourgeoisie" (owners of production) and "proletariat" (those who have nothing to sell but their labour power). Between these two classes there exists an upper middle class comprising of those who do not own the means of production but who ideologically and practically serve the interest of the bourgeoisie and run matters on their behalf (Weber, 1964 : 127). The occupational structure in Ladang Cha'ah can be considered to be similar to this structure of bourgeoisie, upper middle class and proletariat, whereby the managerial category are owners of production, the staff category delegate duties and run the production on behalf of the management, while at the bottom, are the labourers who have nothing but their labour power to sell. Such a class society which exist in the plantation was instrumental in creating a class conscious environment in the estate. Amidst such an environment most of these working women have developed a feeling of inferiority complex since they are considered to be of low status within the estate. Almost all of these women held a high regard for all members of the management staff. This is basically more out of fear than respect since it is a common view among the labour group that the management has the prerogative to employ

and retrench workers. As such, any form of dissatisfaction with regards to working conditions and wages are hardly voiced out to the estate authorities.

As was discussed in Chapter 3, there was also a clear sign of division of labour among the workers where gender-based excuses were used to exclude women from certain types of jobs. This is clearly demonstrated in the plantation economy whereby men dominated the higher occupational level or were given jobs that allows for better earning capacities. As Murdock (1967 : 167) points out :

Division of labour by sex which is a characteristic of all societies, produces a system of gender-role stratification wherein men are generally assigned the positions of prestige and power.

For example supervisory jobs such as that of a mandore are mainly dominated by men. There are only two female mandores and they only supervise female workers. Moreover, there was a discrepancy in wages paid to mandores according to sex, with female mandores earning about \$100 less even though they perform the same duties as the male mandores.

The majority of women who worked for a wage did so from real economic necessity. Apart from their traditionally assigned tasks of housework and child-minding, these women played the added role of being wage

earners. Despite the reality of a high proportion of women - married, single, widowed or divorced - participating in the paid labour force and contributing to the economic well-being of their families or bearing prime responsibility for them, patriarchal ideology still persists. The attitude that a man is the "head of household" still holds sway in most cases. This is also evident in the households where women are contributors to the family purse. Though these women do enjoy considerable authority in the allocation of resources and matters pertaining to the household, they have little or no political power as well as prestige within their homes. The influence of the patriarchal ideology leaves women in a secondary status especially in the presence of an earning male in the family be it a father, husband or son, who usually has the final say when it comes to decision making matters. Some of these women are still financially dependent on their husbands despite their earning capacity because the men control the family purse. Only 40 per cent of the working women had some "political" power within their homes. The remaining 60 per cent had minimal say, if any, despite their earning capacity.

The final category of respondents were women who were members of the staff class. Though these women

from the upper middle class came from similar social and cultural backgrounds as the women from the labour-group, it was observed that, by comparison, they enjoyed a better status of life. They held a position of prestige and sense of superiority since these women, who incidentally were all housewives, automatically acquired the "status" projected by their husbands or sons who belonged to the higher economic strata. Therefore, they enjoyed a better standard of living in terms of living conditions and fringe benefits. These women usually interacted between members of their own class while interaction with members of the labour group was very rare. This is another sign of the existence of class consciousness among the inhabitants of the estate which is also graphically evident from the settlement patterns in the estate. The labourers' quarters are separated from the bungalows of the management staff which are located on higher grounds. Hence, it can be said that between the two categories of women, there is a social stratification based on prestige, class consciousness, economic inequality and status.

5.4 Status of Women and Education

One of the main reasons for the low status of women in the plantations are their low educational achievements. Education is without a doubt very highly correlated with a job a person does since education is the basis for entry into most jobs. A person's job in turn primarily determines his income as most derive their income from their jobs. As Jasbir Sarjit Singh (1975 : 18) explains:

The three factors - education, employment and income, will determine to a great extent the prestige, influence and general life-style enjoyed by a person. Hence, it may be said that education is the primary determinant of the most important aspects of peoples' lives. Any disadvantage in education is a disadvantage in employment, income, social status, prestige, influence and power.

Though various opportunities exist for those without an education, it still cannot be denied that higher educational attainment leads to greater employment opportunities and somewhat improved social status.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the women of Ladang Cha'ah had very low educational attainments and this had strong implications on their lives. It was observed that within the estate the men dominated the more prestigious jobs such as managerial, staff and clerical while the women were placed in less prestigious and low-paying jobs. The women were not employed in

these skilled and semi-skilled work basically because they lacked the necessary qualifications or certificates. There were various reasons for this generally poor educational attainment of women in Ladang Cha'ah particularly those of the labour class. This includes reasons such as poverty, inadequate educational facilities, improper attitude towards education and physical constraints. In short, the disadvantaged social background had a negative effect on the educational achievement of these women.

Among the respondents, the women of the staff class showed a slightly higher level of educational attainment in comparison with women of the labour group. This was because a higher percentage of them attended better facilitated schools in urban areas. However none of these women were involved in any formal work. Most of these women did not wish to work in the estate's production processes as they felt it would be degrading to work in the fields or factory when they were wives of management staff. A few who showed interest in clerical work lacked the necessary qualifications while the rest were contented just being housewives as they were well provided and lived a comfortable life in the estate.

Higher educational attainment also seemed to have improved the marital prospects of these women as in

the case of women from the staff class. Due to their relatively higher educational achievement these women had the opportunity to wed men from the same or higher socio-economic background as themselves. Whereas women of the labour group who normally had a low level of educational attainment usually married men from the same socio-economic background. Hence, educational attainment was seen as a means to improve their socio-economic status through better marital prospects. Therefore, it is evident that educational attainment plays an important role in the socio-economic status of women in Ladang Cha'ah. Women with higher educational attainment occupied the higher rank in the estates' social hierarchy whereas the majority of women with lower educational attainment belonged to the lower labour class.

Women from the staff class were more educated and had better opportunities for advancement in the estates. Many of them were employed in the estates and some of them were promoted to higher positions. This was due to their educational attainment and their ability to perform their duties. In contrast, women from the labour class had lower educational attainment and were mostly employed in menial jobs. They had fewer opportunities for advancement and were often subjected to discrimination and harassment by their superiors. This was due to their low educational attainment and their lack of skills and knowledge. The estates' social hierarchy was based on educational attainment and occupational status. Women with higher educational attainment and better jobs were considered to be of higher status than women with lower educational attainment and menial jobs. This hierarchy was maintained by the estates' management and reinforced by the women themselves. Women with higher status were more respected and had more influence in the estates. They were also more likely to be employed in the staff class and to have better marital prospects. Women with lower status were less respected and had less influence. They were also more likely to be employed in the labour class and to have poorer marital prospects.

In conclusion, it can be said that educational attainment played a significant role in the socio-economic status of women in Ladang Cha'ah. Women with higher educational attainment occupied the higher rank in the estates' social hierarchy, while women with lower educational attainment belonged to the lower labour class. This was due to the estates' social hierarchy, which was based on educational attainment and occupational status, and the women's own educational attainment and ability to perform their duties.

5.5 Conclusion

Indian women in the estates hold a low socio-economic status. Though men and women are oppressed within the profit-oriented capitalistic economy of the plantations, women are relatively worse off. This is because, as estate workers they are the lowest paid and as domestic workers they have to contend with patriarchal values which leaves them in a subordinate position. Inequalities between men and women are related both to that of division of labour in the estates' production and within the home where women are assigned prime responsibility for domestic labour and childminding. These women have limited range of interest beyond that of their household and the estates' production processes. Theirs is an enclosed world with little avenues for personal development. Many of them are illiterate and are ignorant to their subordinate status in society. Most of them are exploited in the economic sector as well as in the domestic sector. Patriarchal ideology persists with a normative and value system which basically makes them docile, subservient and fatalistic. As a result, they continue to face low levels of aspirations and motivations.

In retrospect, it can be concluded that besides finding ways and means to abolish all gender

based ideologies of the capitalistic economy in the plantation, the women themselves are in dire need of a "mental revolution" which is hoped will help them out of their traditional approach to life. However it is evident that the plantation women are a neglected minority. It is thus the responsibility of the relevant authorities, social groups, political organizations as well as various women's organizations to delve into the real problems faced by these plantation women in an effort to raise their socio-economic status in society.

*Blow The Conch! Dance In Joy!
For Women Is Sweeter Than Life Itself:
She's The Protrectress of Life,
And Creatrix Too,
She's The Life Of Our Life,
And The Soul Of Sweetness.*

[Bharathiyar]

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